

## **Best Tales of Terror 2**





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# Best Tales of Terror 2

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*edited by*

**EDMUND CRISPIN**

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# Contents

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<b>FOREWORD</b>	page 9
<b>MOXON'S MASTER</b> Ambrose Bierce	11
<b>A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS</b> M. R. James	22
<b>THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT</b> William Hope Hodgson	40
<b>TIME-FUSE</b> John Metcalfe	54
<b>THE ELECTRIC KING</b> Lord Dunsany	72
<b>CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND</b> Nugent Barker	94
<b>THE DABBLERS</b> W. F. Harvey	119
<b>"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX"</b> John Keir Cross	129
<b>THE SMALL ASSASSIN</b> Ray Bradbury	148
<b>THE FRONTIER GUARDS</b> H. Russell Wakefield	169
<b>THE CAT JUMPS</b> Elizabeth Bowen	175

## CONTENTS

<b>THEY BITE</b> Anthony Boucher	<b>page 186</b>
<b>THE TWO VAYNES</b> L. P. Hartley	<b>199</b>
<b>TELL ME, DOCTOR—PLEASE</b> Kit Read	<b>210</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	<b>223</b>

When I look into the fish-ponds in my garden,  
Methinks I see a thing arm'd with a rake,  
That seems to strike at me. . . .

WEBSTER, *The Duchess of Malfi*





# Foreword

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At the beginning of *Best Tales of Terror* (Faber, 1962) I offered some scattered notes on the technique and rationale of what a *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer—in a pleasant coinage—recently described as “fear-jerkers”. Though very inadequate, those notes were the best I was capable of; and further reflection has rather humiliatingly failed to produce anything fresh. Better, then, in this instance, to leave out the solemnities altogether, and squeeze an extra story into the space they have left vacant. For as Walter de la Mare once wrote in a similar connection, “A prolonged grace . . . instead of whetting appetite may take it away!”

There can of course be no complete assurance that what has seemed frightening to me (or to any anthologist trying this sort of job) will prove frightening to other people as well: here and there the needle, no matter how sharp and shiny, may prick you a fraction off target—or even not get under your skin at all. Yet such failures will, I believe, occur only rarely. To quote a Carter Dickson title, *Fear is the Same*: a species emotion remarkably independent of heredity, age, sex or circumstance. All good tales of terror—such as the fourteen here printed—exploit their authors’ own personal *grues*. But these, though personal, are not private; no matter how subtle and sophisticated their superstructure, they derive in the last analysis from elemental dreads which, being common to us all, are necessarily almost universally communicable. There exists no obligation to attend to such sendings. Still, they do have their specialised charm; they show tremendous unobtrusive writing skill; and if any more-high-minded motive for enjoying them is called for—

## FOREWORD

well, I myself am sure, following Miss Anne Ridler, that they crystallise, and so limit, our nightmares. "Round their circles of light, our fears gather."

Chronologically, the present collection ranges more widely than its predecessor, and perhaps includes a slightly higher proportion of familiar names; for compensation, I have aimed at the maximum possible variety in the stories' subject-matter. To all authors, agents and publishers who have given me reprint permissions I express my gratitude; and a special word of thanks is due to Mr. John Keir Cross, for his kindness in allowing me to jump the gun and put "*Happy Birthday, Dear Alex*" into print for the first time.

E. C.

# Moxon's Master

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AMBROSE BIERCE

“Are you serious?—do you really believe that a machine thinks?”

I got no immediate reply; Moxon was apparently intent upon the coals in the grate, touching them deftly here and there with the fire-poker till they signified a sense of his attention by a brighter glow. For several weeks I had been observing in him a growing habit of delay in answering even the most trivial of commonplace questions. His air, however, was that of pre-occupation rather than deliberation: one might have said that he had “something on his mind”.

Presently he said:

“What is a ‘machine’? The word has been variously defined. Here is one definition from a popular dictionary: ‘Any instrument or organization by which power is applied and made effective, or a desired effect produced.’ Well, then, is not a man a machine? And you will admit that he thinks—or thinks he thinks.”

“If you do not wish to answer my question,” I said, rather testily, “why not say so?—all that you say is mere evasion. You know well enough that when I say ‘machine’ I do not mean a man, but something that man has made and controls.”

“When it does not control him,” he said, rising abruptly and looking out of a window, whence nothing was visible in the blackness of a stormy night. A moment later he turned about and with a smile said: “I beg your pardon; I had no thought of evasion. I considered the dictionary man’s unconscious testimony



## AMBROSE BIERCE

suggestive and worth something in the discussion. I can give your question a direct answer easily enough: I do believe that a machine thinks about the work it is doing."

That was direct enough, certainly. It was not altogether pleasing, for it tended to confirm a sad suspicion that Moxon's devotion to study and work in his machine-shop had not been good for him. I knew, for one thing, that he suffered from insomnia, and that is no light affliction. Had it affected his mind? His reply to my question seemed to me then evidence that it had; perhaps I should think differently about it now. I was younger then, and among the blessings that are not denied to youth is ignorance. Incited by that great stimulant to controversy, I said:

"And what, pray, does it think with—in the absence of a brain?"

The reply, coming with less than his customary delay, took his favourite form of counter-interrogation:

"With what does a plant think—in the absence of a brain?"

"Ah, plants also belong to the philosopher class! I should be pleased to know some of their conclusions; you may omit the premises."

"Perhaps," he replied, apparently unaffected by my foolish irony, "you may be able to infer their convictions from their acts. I will spare you the familiar examples of the sensitive mimosa, the several insectivorous flowers and those whose stamens bend down and shake their pollen upon the entering bee in order that he may fertilize their distant mates. But observe this. In an open spot in my garden I planted a climbing vine. When it was barely above the surface I set a stake into the soil a yard away. The vine at once made for it, but as it was about to reach it after several days I removed it a few feet. The vine at once altered its course, making an acute angle, and again made for the stake. This manœuvre was repeated several times, but finally, as if discouraged, the vine abandoned the pursuit and, ignoring further attempts to divert it, travelled to a small tree, farther away, which it climbed.

## MOXON'S MASTER

"Roots of the eucalyptus will prolong themselves incredibly in search of moisture. A well-known horticulturist relates that one entered an old drain pipe and followed it until it came to a break, where a section of the pipe had been removed to make way for a stone wall that had been built across its course. The root left the drain and followed the wall until it found an opening where a stone had fallen out. It crept through and, following the other side of the wall back to the drain, entered the unexplored part and resumed its journey."

"And all this?"

"Can you miss the significance of it? It shows the consciousness of plants. It proves that they think."

"Even if it did—what then? We were speaking, not of plants, but of machines. They may be composed partly of wood—wood that has no longer vitality—or wholly of metal. Is thought an attribute also of the mineral kingdom?"

"How else do you explain the phenomena, for example, of crystallization?"

"I do not explain them."

"Because you cannot without affirming what you wish to deny—namely, intelligent co-operation among the constituent elements of the crystals. When soldiers form lines, or hollow squares, you call it reason. When wild geese in flight take the form of a letter V you say instinct. When the homogeneous atoms of a mineral, moving freely in solution, arrange themselves into shapes mathematically perfect, or particles of frozen moisture into the symmetrical and beautiful forms of snowflakes, you have nothing to say. You have not even invented a name to conceal your heroic unreason."

Moxon was speaking with unusual animation and earnestness. As he paused I heard in an adjoining room known to me as his "machine-shop", which no one but himself was permitted to enter, a singular thumping sound, as of someone pounding upon a table with an open hand. Moxon heard it at the same moment and, visibly agitated, rose and hurriedly passed into the room whence it came. I thought it odd that anyone else should be in



## AMBROSE BIERCE

there, and my interest in my friend—with doubtless a touch of unwarrantable curiosity—led me to listen intently, though, I am happy to say, not at the keyhole. There were confused sounds, as of a struggle or scuffle; the floor shook. I distinctly heard hard breathing and a hoarse whisper which said “Damn you!” Then all was silent, and presently Moxon reappeared and said, with a rather sorry smile:

“Pardon me for leaving you so abruptly. I have a machine in there that lost its temper and cut up rough.”

Fixing my eyes steadily upon his left cheek, which was traversed by four parallel excoriations showing blood, I said:

“How would it do to trim its nails?”

I could have spared myself the jest; he gave it no attention, but seated himself in the chair that he had left and resumed the interrupted monologue as if nothing had occurred:

“Doubtless you do not hold with those (I need not name them to a man of your reading) who have taught that all matter is sentiment, that every atom is a living, feeling, conscious being. *I* do. There is no such thing as dead, inert matter; it is all alive; all instinct with force, actual and potential; all sensitive to the same forces in its environment and susceptible to the contagion of higher and subtler ones residing in such superior organisms as it may be brought into relation with, as those of man when he is fashioning it into an instrument of his will. It absorbs something of his intelligence and purpose—more of them in proportion to the complexity of the resulting machine and that of its work.

“Do you happen to recall Herbert Spencer’s definition of ‘life’? I read it thirty years ago. He may have altered it afterward, for anything I know, but in all that time I have been unable to think of a single word that could profitably be changed or added or removed. It seems to me not only the best definition, but the only possible one.

“‘Life,’ he says, ‘is a definite combination of heterogeneous changes, both simultaneous and successive, in correspondence with external coexistences and sequences.’ ”

## MOXON'S MASTER

"That defines the phenomenon," I said, "but gives no hint of its cause."

"That," he replied, "is all that any definition can do. As Mill points out, we know nothing of cause except as an antecedent—nothing of effect except as a consequent. Of certain phenomena, one never occurs without another, which is dissimilar: the first in point of time we call cause; the second, effect. One who had many times seen a rabbit pursued by a dog, and had never seen rabbits and dogs otherwise, would think the rabbit the cause of the dog.

"But I fear," he added, laughing naturally enough, "that my rabbit is leading me a long way from the track of my legitimate quarry: I'm indulging in the pleasure of the chase for its own sake. What I want you to observe is that in Herbert Spencer's definition of 'life' the activity of a machine is included—there is nothing in the definition that is not applicable to it. According to this sharpest of observers and deepest of thinkers, if a man during his period of activity is alive, so is a machine when in operation. As an inventor and constructor of machines I know that to be true."

Moxon was silent for a long time, gazing absently into the fire. It was growing late and I thought it time to be going, but somehow I did not like the notion of leaving him in that isolated house, all alone except for the presence of some person of whose nature my conjectures could go no further than that it was unfriendly, perhaps malign. Leaning toward him and looking earnestly into his eyes while making a motion with my hand through the door of his workshop, I said:

"Moxon, whom have you in there?"

Somewhat to my surprise he laughed lightly and answered without hesitation:

"Nobody; the incident that you have in mind was caused by my folly in leaving a machine in action with nothing to act upon, while I undertook the interminable task of enlightening your understanding. Do you happen to know that Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm?"



## AMBROSE BIERCE

"Oh bother them both!" I replied, rising and laying hold of my overcoat. "I'm going to wish you good night; and I'll add the hope that the machine which you inadvertently left in action will have her gloves on the next time you think it needful to stop her."

Without waiting to observe the effect of my shot I left the house.

Rain was falling, and the darkness was intense. In the sky beyond the crest of a hill towards which I groped my way along precarious plank sidewalks and across miry, unpaved streets I could see the faint glow of the city's lights, but behind me nothing was visible but a single window of Moxon's house. It glowed with what seemed to me a mysterious and fateful meaning. I knew it was an uncurtained aperture in my friend's "machine-shop", and I had little doubt that he had resumed the studies interrupted by his duties as my instructor in mechanical consciousness and the fatherhood of Rhythm. Odd, and in some degree humorous, as his convictions seemed to me at that time, I could not wholly divest myself of the feeling that they had some tragic relation to his life and character—perhaps to his destiny—although I no longer entertained the notion that they were the vagaries of a disordered mind. Whatever might be thought of his views, his exposition of them was too logical for that. Over and over, his last words came back to me: "Consciousness is the creature of Rhythm." Bald and terse as the statement was, I now found it infinitely alluring. At each recurrence it broadened in meaning and deepened in suggestion. Why, here (I thought) is something upon which to found a philosophy. If Consciousness is the product of Rhythm all things *are* conscious, for all have motion, and all motion is rhythmic. I wondered if Moxon knew the significance and breadth of his thought—the scope of this momentous generalization; or had he arrived at his philosophic faith by the tortuous and uncertain road of observation?

That faith was then new to me, and all Moxon's expounding had failed to make me a convert; but now it seemed as if a great light shone about me, like that which fell upon Saul of Tarsus;



and out there in the storm and darkness and solitude I experienced what Lewes calls "The endless variety and excitement of philosophic thought". I exulted in a new sense of knowledge, a new pride of reason. My feet seemed hardly to touch the earth; it was as if I were uplifted and borne through the air by invisible wings.

Yielding to an impulse to seek further light from him whom I now recognized as my master and guide, I had unconsciously turned about, and almost before I was aware of having done so found myself again at Moxon's door. I was drenched with rain, but felt no discomfort. Unable in my excitement to find the door-bell, I instinctively tried the knob. It turned and, entering, I mounted the stairs to the room that I had so recently left. All was dark and silent; Moxon, as I had supposed, was in the adjoining room—the "machine-shop". Groping along the wall until I found the communicating door, I knocked loudly several times, but got no response, which I attributed to the uproar outside, for the wind was blowing a gale and dashing the rain against the thin walls in sheets. The drumming upon the shingle roof spanning the unceiled room was loud and incessant.

I had never been invited into the machine-shop—had, indeed, been denied admittance, as had all others, with one exception, a skilled metal worker, of whom no one knew anything except that his name was Haley and his habit silence. But in my spiritual exaltation discretion and civility were alike forgotten, and I opened the door. What I saw took all philosophical speculation out of me in short order.

Moxon sat facing me at the further side of a small table upon which a single candle made all the light that was in the room. Opposite him, his back toward me, sat another person. On the table between the two was a chess-board; the men were playing. I knew little of chess, but as only a few pieces were on the board it was obvious that the game was near its close. Moxon was intensely interested—not so much, it seemed to me, in the game as in his antagonist, upon whom he had fixed so intent a look that, standing though I did directly in the line of his vision, I was altogether unobserved. His face was ghastly white, and his eyes

## AMBROSE BIERCE

glittered like diamonds. Of his antagonist I had only a back view, but that was sufficient; I should not have cared to see his face.

He was apparently not more than five feet in height, with proportions suggesting those of a gorilla—a tremendous breadth of shoulders, thick, short neck and broad, squat head, which had a tangled growth of black hair and was topped with a crimson fez. A tunic of the same colour, belted tightly to the waist, reached the seat—apparently a box—upon which he sat; his legs and feet were not seen. His left forearm appeared to rest in his lap; he moved his pieces with his right hand, which seemed disproportionately long.

I had shrunk back and now stood a little to one side of the doorway and in shadow. If Moxon had looked farther than the face of his opponent he could have observed nothing now, except that the door was open. Something forbade me either to enter or retire, a feeling—I know not how it came—that I was in the presence of an imminent tragedy and might serve my friend by remaining. With a scarcely conscious rebellion against the indelicacy of the act I remained.

The play was rapid. Moxon hardly glanced at the board before making his moves, and to my unskilled eye seemed to move the piece most convenient to his hand, his motions in doing so being quick, nervous and lacking in precision. The response of his antagonist, while equally prompt in the interception, was made with a slow, uniform, mechanical and, I thought, somewhat theatrical movement of the arm that was a sore trial to my patience. There was something unearthly about it all, and I caught myself shuddering. But I was wet and cold.

Two or three times after moving a piece the stranger slightly inclined his head, and each time I observed that Moxon shifted his king. All at once the thought came to me that the man was dumb. And then that he was a machine—an automaton chess-player! Then I remembered that Moxon had once spoken to me of having invented such a piece of mechanism, though I did not understand that it had actually been constructed. Was all his talk about the consciousness and intelligence of machines merely



## MOXON'S MASTER

a prelude to eventual exhibition of this device—only a trick to intensify the effect of its mechanical action upon me in my ignorance of its secret?

A fine end, this, of all my intellectual transports—my “endless variety and excitement of philosophic thought”! I was about to retire in disgust when something occurred to hold my curiosity. I observed a shrug of the thing's great shoulders, as if it were irritated: and so natural was this—so entirely human—that in my new view of the matter it startled me. Nor was that all, for a moment later it struck the table sharply with its clenched hand. At that gesture Moxon seemed even more startled than I; he pushed his chair a little backward, as in alarm.

Presently Moxon, whose play it was, raised his hand high above the board, pounced upon one of his pieces like a sparrowhawk and with the exclamation “Checkmate!” rose quickly to his feet and stepped behind his chair. The automaton sat motionless.

The wind had now gone down, but I heard, at lessening intervals and progressively louder, the rumble and roll of thunder. In the pauses between I now became conscious of a low humming or buzzing which, like the thunder, grew momentarily louder and more distinct. It seemed to come from the body of the automaton, and was unmistakably a whirring of wheels. It gave me the impression of a disordered mechanism which had escaped the repressive and regulating action of some controlling part—an effect such as might be expected if a pawl should be jostled from the teeth of a ratchet-wheel. But before I had time for much conjecture as to its nature my attention was taken by the strange motions of the automaton itself. A slight but continuous convulsion appeared to have possession of it. In body and head it shook like a man with palsy or an ague chill, and the motion augmented every moment until the entire figure was in violent agitation. Suddenly it sprang to its feet and with a movement almost too quick for the eye to follow shot forward across table and chair, with both arms thrust forth to their full length—the posture and lunge of a diver. Moxon tried to throw himself back-

## AMBROSE BIERCE

ward out of reach, but he was too late; I saw the horrible thing's hands close upon his throat, his own clutch its wrists. Then the table was overturned, the candle thrown to the floor and extinguished, and all was black dark. But the noise of the struggle was dreadfully distinct, and most terrible of all were the raucous, squawking sounds made by the strangled man's efforts to breathe. Guided by the infernal hubbub, I sprang to the rescue of my friend, but had hardly taken a stride in the darkness when the whole room blazed with a blinding white light that burned into my brain and heart and memory a vivid picture of the combatants on the floor, Moxon underneath, his throat still in the clutch of those iron hands, his head forced backward, his eyes protruding, his mouth wide open and his tongue thrust out; and—horrible contrast!—upon the painted face of his assassin an expression of tranquil and profound thought, as in the solution of a problem in chess! This I observed, then all was blackness and silence.

Three days later I recovered consciousness in a hospital. As the memory of that tragic night slowly evolved in my ailing brain I recognized in my attendant Moxon's confidential workman, Haley. Responding to a look he approached, smiling.

"Tell me about it," I managed to say, faintly—"all about it."

"Certainly," he said; "you were carried unconscious from a burning house—Moxon's. Nobody knows how you came to be there. You may have to do a little explaining. The origin of the fire is a bit mysterious, too. My own notion is that the house was struck by lightning."

"And Moxon?"

"Buried yesterday—what was left of him."

Apparently this reticent person could unfold himself on occasion. When imparting shocking intelligence to the sick he was affable enough. After some moments of the keenest mental suffering I ventured to ask another question:

"Who rescued me?"

"Well, if that interests you—I did."

"Thank you, Mr. Haley, and may God bless you for it. Did

## MOXON'S MASTER

you rescue, also, that charming product of your skill, the automaton chess-player that murdered its inventor?"

The man was silent a long time, looking away from me. Presently he turned and gravely said:

"Do you know that?"

"I do," I replied; "I saw it done."

That was many years ago. If asked to-day I should answer less confidently.

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# A Warning to the Curious

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M. R. JAMES

The place on the east coast which the reader is asked to consider is Seaburgh. It is not very different now from what I remember it to have been when I was a child. Marshes intersected by dykes to the south, recalling the early chapters of *Great Expectations*; flat fields to the north, merging into heath; heath, fir woods, and, above all, gorse, inland. A long sea-front and a street: behind that a spacious church of flint, with a broad, solid western tower and a peal of six bells. How well I remember their sound on a hot Sunday in August, as our party went slowly up the white, dusty slope of road towards them, for the church stands at the top of a short, steep incline. They rang with a flat clacking sort of sound on those hot days, but when the air was softer they were mellower too. The railway ran down to its little terminus farther along the same road. There was a gay white windmill just before you came to the station, and another down near the shingle at the south end of the town, and yet others on higher ground to the north. There were cottages of bright red brick with slate roofs . . . but why do I encumber you with these commonplace details? The fact is that they come crowding to the point of the pencil when it begins to write of Seaburgh. I should like to be sure that I had allowed the right ones to get on to the paper. But I forgot. I have not quite done with the word-painting business yet.

Walk away from the sea and the town, pass the station, and turn up the road on the right. It is a sandy road, parallel with the railway, and if you follow it, it climbs to somewhat higher

## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

ground. On your left (you are now going northward) is heath, on your right (the side towards the sea) is a belt of old firs, wind-beaten, thick at the top, with the slope that old seaside trees have; seen on the skyline from the train they would tell you in an instant, if you did not know it, that you were approaching a windy coast. Well, at the top of my little hill, a line of these firs strikes out and runs towards the sea, for there is a ridge that goes that way; and the ridge ends in a rather well-defined mound commanding the level fields of rough grass, and a little knot of fir trees crowns it. And here you may sit on a hot spring day, very well content to look at blue sea, white windmills, red cottages, bright green grass, church tower, and distant martello tower on the south.

As I have said, I began to know Seaburgh as a child; but a gap of a good many years separates my early knowledge from that which is more recent. Still it keeps its place in my affections, and any tales of it that I pick up have an interest for me. One such tale is this: it came to me in a place very remote from Seaburgh, and quite accidentally, from a man whom I had been able to oblige—enough in his opinion to justify his making me his confidant to this extent.

I know all that country more or less (he said). I used to go to Seaburgh pretty regularly for golf in the spring. I generally put up at the "Bear", with a friend—Henry Long it was, you knew him perhaps—"Slightly," I said) and we used to take a sitting-room and be very happy there. Since he died I haven't cared to go there. And I don't know that I should anyhow after the particular thing that happened on our last visit.

It was in April, 19—, we were there, and by some chance we were almost the only people in the hotel. So the ordinary public rooms were practically empty, and we were the more surprised when, after dinner, our sitting-room door opened, and a young man put his head in. We were aware of this young man. He was rather a rabbity anæmic subject—light hair and light eyes—but not unpleasing. So when he said: "I beg your pardon, is this



a private room?" we did not growl and say: "Yes, it is," but Long said, or I did—no matter which: "Please come in." "Oh, may I?" he said, and seemed relieved. Of course it was obvious that he wanted company; and as he was a reasonable kind of person—not the sort to bestow his whole family history on you—we urged him to make himself at home. "I dare say you find the other rooms rather bleak," I said. Yes, he did: but it was really too good of us, and so on. That being got over, he made some pretence of reading a book. Long was playing Patience, I was writing. It became plain to me after a few minutes that this visitor of ours was in rather a state of fidgets or nerves, which communicated itself to me, and so I put away my writing and turned to at engaging him in talk.

After some remarks, which I forget, he became rather confidential. "You'll think it very odd of me" (this was the sort of way he began), "but the fact is I've had something of a shock." Well, I recommended a drink of some cheering kind, and we had it. The waiter coming in made an interruption (and I thought our young man seemed very jumpy when the door opened), but after a while he got back to his woes again. There was nobody he knew in the place, and he did happen to know who we both were (it turned out there was some common acquaintance in town), and really he did want a word of advice, if we didn't mind. Of course we both said: "By all means," or "Not at all," and Long put away his cards. And we settled down to hear what his difficulty was.

"It began," he said, "more than a week ago, when I bicycled over to Froston, only about five or six miles, to see the church; I'm very much interested in architecture, and it's got one of those pretty porches with niches and shields. I took a photograph of it, and then an old man who was tidying up in the churchyard came and asked if I'd care to look into the church. I said yes, and he produced a key and let me in. There wasn't much inside, but I told him it was a nice little church, and he kept it very clean, 'but,' I said, 'the porch is the best part of it.' We were just outside the porch then, and he said, 'Ah, yes, that is a nice porch;



## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

and do you know, sir, what's the meanin' of that coat of arms there?"

"It was the one with the three crowns, and though I'm not much of a herald, I was able to say yes, I thought it was the old arms of the kingdom of East Anglia.

" 'That's right, sir,' he said, 'and do you know the meanin' of them three crowns that's on it?'

"I said I'd no doubt it was known, but I couldn't recollect to have heard it myself.

" 'Well, then,' he said, 'for all you're a scholard, I can tell you something you don't know. Them's the three 'oly crowns what was buried in the ground near by the coast to keep the Germans from landing—ah, I can see you don't believe that. But I tell you, if it hadn't have been for one of them 'oly crowns bein' there still, them Germans would a landed here time and again, they would. Landed with their ships, and killed man, woman and child in their beds. Now then, that's the truth what I'm telling you, that is; and if you don't believe me, you ast the rector. There he comes: you ast him, I says.'

"I looked round, and there was the rector, a nice-looking old man, coming up the path; and before I could begin assuring my old man, who was getting quite excited, that I didn't disbelieve him, the rector struck in, and said: 'What's all this about, John? Good day to you, sir. Have you been looking at our little church?'

"So then there was a little talk which allowed the old man to calm down, and then the rector asked him again what was the matter.

" 'Oh,' he said, 'it warn't nothink, only I was telling this gentleman he'd ought to ast you about them 'oly crowns.'

" 'Ah, yes, to be sure,' said the rector, 'that's a very curious matter, isn't it? But I don't know whether the gentleman is interested in our old stories, eh?'

" 'Oh, he'll be interested fast enough,' says the old man, 'he'll put his confidence in what you tells him, sir; why, you known William Ager yourself, father and son too.'

"Then I put in a word to say how much I should like to hear all about it, and before many minutes I was walking up the village street with the rector, who had one or two words to say to parishioners, and then to the rectory, where he took me into his study. He had made out, on the way, that I really was capable of taking an intelligent interest in a piece of folk-lore, and not quite the ordinary tripper. So he was very willing to talk, and it is rather surprising to me that the particular legend he told me has not made its way into print before. His account of it was this: 'There has always been a belief in these parts in the three holy crowns. The old people say they were buried in different places near the coast to keep off the Danes or the French or the Germans. And they say that one of the three was dug up a long time ago, and another has disappeared by the encroaching of the sea, and one's still left doing its work, keeping off invaders. Well, now, if you have read the ordinary guides and histories of this county, you will remember perhaps that in 1687 a crown, which was said to be the crown of Redwald, King of the East Angles, was dug up at Rendlesham, and alas! alas! melted down before it was even properly described or drawn. Well, Rendlesham isn't on the coast, but it isn't so very far inland, and it's on a very important line of access. And I believe that is the crown which the people mean when they say that one has been dug up. Then on the south you don't want me to tell you where there was a Saxon royal palace which is now under the sea, eh? Well, there was the second crown, I take it. And up beyond these two, they say, lies the third.'

" 'Do they say where it is?' of course I asked.

"He said, 'Yes, indeed, they do, but they don't tell,' and his manner did not encourage me to put the obvious question. Instead of that I waited a moment, and said: 'What did the old man mean when he said you knew William Ager, as if that had something to do with the crowns?'

" 'To be sure,' he said, 'now that's another curious story. These Agers—it's a very old name in these parts, but I can't find that they were ever people of quality or big owners—these



## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

Agers say, or said, that their branch of the family were the guardians of the last crown. A certain old Nathaniel Ager was the first one I knew—I was born and brought up quite near here—and he, I believe, camped out at the place during the whole of the war of 1870. William, his son, did the same, I know, during the South African War. And young William, *his* son, who has only died fairly recently, took lodgings at the cottage nearest the spot, and I've no doubt hastened his end, for he was a consumptive, by exposure and night watching. And he was the last of that branch. It was a dreadful grief to him to think that he was the last, but he could do nothing, the only relations at all near to him were in the colonies. I wrote letters for him to them imploring them to come over on business very important to the family, but there has been no answer. So the last of the holy crowns, if it's there, has no guardian now.'

"That was what the rector told me, and you can fancy how interesting I found it. The only thing I could think of when I left him was how to hit upon the spot where the crown was supposed to be. I wish I'd left it alone.

"But there was a sort of fate in it, for as I bicycled back past the churchyard wall my eye caught a fairly new gravestone, and on it was the name of William Ager. Of course I got off and read it. It said 'of this parish, died at Seaburgh, 19—, aged 28.' There it was, you see. A little judicious questioning in the right place, and I should at least find the cottage nearest the spot. Only I didn't quite know what was the right place to begin my questioning at. Again there was fate: it took me to the curiosity-shop down that way—you know—and I turned over some old books and, if you please, one was a prayer-book of 1740-odd, in a rather handsome binding—I'll just go and get it, it's in my room."

He left us in a state of some surprise, but we had hardly time to exchange any remarks when he was back, panting, and handed us the book opened at the fly-leaf, on which was, in a straggly hand:

M. R. JAMES

“Nathaniel Ager is my name and England is my nation,  
Seaburgh is my dwelling-place and Christ is my Salvation,  
When I am dead and in my Grave, and all my bones are  
rotton,  
I hope the Lord will think on me when I am quite forgotton.”

This poem was dated 1754, and there were many more entries of Agers, Nathaniel, Frederick, William, and so on, ending with William, 19—.

“You see,” he said, “anybody would call it the greatest bit of luck. *I* did, but *I* don’t now. Of course I asked the shopman about William Ager, and of course he happened to remember that he lodged in a cottage in the North Field and died there. This was just chalking the road for me. I knew which the cottage must be: there is only one sizeable one about there. The next thing was to scrape some sort of acquaintance with the people, and I took a walk that way at once. A dog did the business for me: he made at me so fiercely that they had to run out and beat him off, and then naturally begged my pardon, and we got into talk. I had only to bring up Ager’s name, and pretend I knew, or thought I knew something of him, and then the woman said how sad it was him dying so young, and she was sure it came of him spending the night out of doors in the cold weather. Then I had to say: ‘Did he go out on the sea at night?’ and she said: ‘Oh, no, it was on the hillock yonder with the trees on it.’ And there I was.

“I know something about digging in these barrows: I’ve opened many of them in the down country. But that was with owner’s leave, and in broad daylight and with men to help. I had to prospect very carefully here before I put a spade in: I couldn’t trench across the mound, and with those old firs growing there I knew there would be awkward tree roots. Still the soil was very light and sandy and easy, and there was a rabbit hole or so that might be developed into a sort of tunnel. The going out and coming back at odd hours to the hotel was going to be the awkward part. When I made up my mind about the way to



## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

excavate I told the people that I was called away for a night, and I spent it out there. I made my tunnel: I won't bore you with the details of how I supported it and filled it in when I'd done, but the main thing is that I got the crown."

Naturally we both broke out into exclamations of surprise and interest. I for one had long known about the finding of the crown at Rendlesham and had often lamented its fate. No one has ever seen an Anglo-Saxon crown—at least no one had. But our man gazed at us with a rueful eye. "Yes," he said, "and the worst of it is I don't know how to put it back."

"Put it back?" we cried out. "Why, my dear sir, you've made one of the most exciting finds ever heard of in this country. Of course it ought to go to the Jewel House at the Tower. What's your difficulty? If you're thinking about the owner of the land, and treasure-trove, and all that, we can certainly help you through. Nobody's going to make a fuss about technicalities in a case of this kind."

Probably more was said, but all he did was to put his face in his hands, and mutter: "I don't know how to put it back."

At last Long said: "You'll forgive me, I hope, if I seem impertinent, but are you *quite* sure you've got it?" I was wanting to ask much the same question myself, for of course the story did seem a lunatic's dream when one thought over it. But I hadn't quite dared to say what might hurt the poor young man's feelings. However, he took it quite calmly—really, with the calm of despair, you might say. He sat up and said: "Oh, yes, there's no doubt of that: I have it here, in my room, locked up in my bag. You can come and look at it if you like: I won't offer to bring it here."

We were not likely to let the chance slip. We went with him; his room was only a few doors off. The boots was just collecting shoes in the passage: or so we thought: afterwards we were not sure. Our visitor—his name was Paxton—was in a worse state of shivers than before, and went hurriedly into the room, and beckoned us after him, turned on the light, and shut the door

carefully. Then he unlocked his kit-bag, and produced a bundle of clean pocket-handkerchiefs in which something was wrapped, laid it on the bed, and undid it. I can now say I *have* seen an actual Anglo-Saxon crown. It was of silver—as the Rendlesham one is always said to have been—it was set with some gems, mostly antique intaglios and cameos, and was of rather plain, almost rough workmanship. In fact, it was like those you see on the coins and in the manuscripts. I found no reason to think it was later than the ninth century. I was intensely interested, of course, and I wanted to turn it over in my hands, but Paxton prevented me. “Don’t *you* touch it,” he said, “I’ll do that.” And with a sigh that was, I declare to you, dreadful to hear, he took it up and turned it about so that we could see every part of it. “Seen enough?” he said at last, and we nodded. He wrapped it up and locked it in his bag, and stood looking at us dumbly. “Come back to our room,” Long said, “and tell us what the trouble is.” He thanked us, and said: “Will you go first and see if—if the coast is clear?” That wasn’t very intelligible, for our proceedings hadn’t been, after all, very suspicious, and the hotel, as I said, was practically empty. However, we were beginning to have inklings of—we didn’t know what, and anyhow nerves are infectious. So we did go, first peering out as we opened the door, and fancying (I found we both had the fancy) that a shadow, or more than a shadow—but it made no sound—passed from before us to one side as we came out into the passage. “It’s all right,” we whispered to Paxton—whispering seemed the proper tone—and we went, with him between us, back to our sitting-room. I was preparing, when we got there, to be ecstatic about the unique interest of what we had seen, but when I looked at Paxton I saw that would be terribly out of place, and I left it to him to begin.

“What *is* to be done?” was his opening. Long thought it right (as he explained to me afterwards) to be obtuse, and said: “Why not find out who the owner of the land is, and inform——” “Oh, no, no!” Paxton broke in impatiently. “I beg your pardon: you’ve been very kind, but don’t you see it’s *got* to go back, and



## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

I daren't be there at night, and daytime's impossible. Perhaps, though, you don't see: well, then, the truth is that I've never been alone since I touched it." I was beginning some fairly stupid comment, but Long caught my eye, and I stopped. Long said: "I think I do see, perhaps: but wouldn't it be—a relief—to tell us a little more clearly what the situation is?"

Then it all came out: Paxton looked over his shoulder and beckoned to us to come nearer to him, and began speaking in a low voice: we listened most intently, of course, and compared notes afterwards, and I wrote down our version, so I am confident I have what he told us almost word for word. He said: "It began when I was first prospecting, and put me off again and again. There was always somebody—a man—standing by one of the firs. This was in daylight, you know. He was never in front of me. I always saw him with the tail of my eye on the left or the right, and he was never there when I looked straight for him. I would lie down for quite a long time and take careful observations, and make sure there was no one, and then when I got up and began prospecting again, there he was. And he began to give me hints, besides; for wherever I put that prayer-book—short of locking it up, which I did at last—when I came back to my room it was always out on my table open at the fly-leaf where the names are, and one of my razors across it to keep it open. I'm sure he just can't open my bag, or something more would have happened. You see, he's light and weak, but all the same I daren't face him. Well, then, when I was making the tunnel, of course it was worse, and if I hadn't been so keen I should have dropped the whole thing and run. It was like someone scraping at my back all the time: I thought for a long time it was only soil dropping on me, but as I got nearer the—the crown, it was unmistakable. And when I actually laid it bare and got my fingers into the ring of it and pulled it out, there came a sort of cry behind me—oh, I can't tell you how desolate it was! And horribly threatening too. It spoilt all my pleasure in my find—cut it off that moment. And if I hadn't been the wretched fool I am, I should have put the thing back and left it.

But I didn't. The rest of the time was just awful. I had hours to get through before I could decently come back to the hotel. First I spent time filling up my tunnel and covering my tracks, and all the while he was there trying to thwart me. Sometimes, you know, you see him, and sometimes you don't, just as he pleases, I think: he's there, but he has some power over your eyes. Well, I wasn't off the spot very long before sunrise, and then I had to get to the junction for Seaburgh, and take a train back. And though it was daylight fairly soon, I don't know if that made it much better. There were always hedges, or gorse-bushes, or park fences along the road—some sort of cover, I mean—and I was never easy for a second. And then when I began to meet people going to work, they always looked behind me very strangely: it might have been that they were surprised at seeing anyone so early; but I didn't think it was only that, and I don't now: they didn't look exactly at *me*. And the porter at the train was like that too. And the guard held open the door after I'd got into the carriage—just as he would if there was somebody else coming, you know. Oh, you may be very sure it isn't my fancy," he said with a dull sort of laugh. Then he went on: "And even if I do get it put back, he won't forgive me: I can tell that. And I was so happy a fortnight ago." He dropped into a chair, and I believe he began to cry.

We didn't know what to say, but we felt we must come to the rescue somehow, and so—it really seemed the only thing—we said if he was so set on putting the crown back in its place, we would help him. And I must say that after what we had heard it did seem the right thing. If these horrid consequences had come on this poor man, might there not really be something in the original idea of the crown having some curious power bound up with it, to guard the coast? At least, that was my feeling, and I think it was Long's too. Our offer was very welcome to Paxton, anyhow. When could we do it? It was nearing half-past ten. Could we contrive to make a late walk plausible to the hotel people that very night? We looked out of the window: there was a brilliant full moon—the Paschal moon. Long



## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

undertook to tackle the boots and propitiate him. He was to say that we should not be much over the hour, and if we did find it so pleasant that we stopped out a bit longer we would see that he didn't lose by sitting up. Well, we were pretty regular customers of the hotel, and did not give much trouble, and were considered by the servants to be not under the mark in the way of tips; and so the boots *was* propitiated, and let us out on to the sea-front, and remained, as we heard later, looking after us. Paxton had a large coat over his arm, under which was the wrapped-up crown.

So we were off on this strange errand before we had time to think how very much out of the way it was. I have told this part quite shortly on purpose, for it really does represent the haste with which we settled our plan and took action. "The shortest way is up the hill and through the churchyard," Paxton said, as we stood a moment before the hotel looking up and down the front. There was nobody about—nobody at all. Seaburgh out of the season is an early, quiet place. "We can't go along the dyke by the cottage, because of the dog," Paxton also said, when I pointed to what I thought a shorter way along the front and across two fields. The reason he gave was good enough. We went up the road to the church, and turned in at the churchyard gate. I confess to having thought that there might be some lying there who might be conscious of our business: but if it was so, they were also conscious that one who was on their side, so to say, had us under surveillance, and we saw no sign of them. But under observation we felt we were, as I have never felt it at another time. Specially was it so when we passed out of the churchyard into a narrow path with close high hedges, through which we hurried as Christian did through that Valley; and so got out into open fields. Then along hedges, though I would sooner have been in the open, where I could see if anyone was visible behind me; over a gate or two, and then a swerve to the left, taking us up on to the ridge which ended in that mound.

As we neared it, Henry Long felt, and I felt too, that there were what I can only call dim presences waiting for us, as well

as a far more actual one attending us. Of Paxton's agitation all this time I can give you no adequate picture: he breathed like a hunted beast, and we could not either of us look at his face. How he would manage when we got to the very place we had not troubled to think: he had seemed so sure that that would not be difficult. Nor was it. I never saw anything like the dash with which he flung himself at a particular spot in the side of the mound, and tore at it, so that in a very few minutes the greater part of his body was out of sight. We stood holding the coat and that bundle of handkerchiefs, and looking, very fearfully, I must admit, about us. There was nothing to be seen: a line of dark firs behind us made one skyline, more trees and the church tower half a mile off on the right, cottages and a windmill on the horizon on the left, calm sea dead in front, faint barking of a dog at a cottage on a gleaming dyke between us and it: full moon making that path we know across the sea: the eternal whisper of the Scotch firs just above us, and of the sea in front. Yet, in all this quiet, an acute, an acrid consciousness of a restrained hostility very near us, like a dog on a leash that might be let go at any moment.

Paxton pulled himself out of the hole, and stretched a hand back to us. "Give it to me," he whispered, "unwrapped." We pulled off the handkerchiefs, and he took the crown. The moonlight just fell on it as he snatched it. We had not ourselves touched that bit of metal, and I have thought since that it was just as well. In another moment Paxton was out of the hole again and busy shovelling back the soil with hands that were already bleeding. He would have none of our help, though. It was much the longest part of the job to get the place to look undisturbed: yet—I don't know how—he made a wonderful success of it. At last he was satisfied, and we turned back.

We were a couple of hundred yards from the hill when Long suddenly said to him: "I say, you've left your coat there. That won't do. See?" And I certainly did see it—the long dark overcoat lying where the tunnel had been. Paxton had not stopped, however: he only shook his head, and held up the coat on his



## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

arm. And when we joined him, he said, without any excitement, but as if nothing mattered any more: "That wasn't my coat." And, indeed, when we looked back again, that dark thing was not to be seen.

Well, we got out on to the road, and came rapidly back that way. It was well before twelve when we got in, trying to put a good face on it, and saying—Long and I—what a lovely night it was for a walk. The boots was on the look-out for us, and we made remarks like that for his edification as we entered the hotel. He gave another look up and down the sea-front before he locked the front door, and said: "You didn't meet many people about, I s'pose, sir?" "No, indeed, not a soul," I said; at which I remember Paxton looked oddly at me. "Only I thought I see someone turn up the station road after you gentlemen," said the boots. "Still, you was three together, and I don't suppose he meant mischief." I didn't know what to say; Long merely said "Good night", and we went off upstairs, promising to turn out all lights, and to go to bed in a few minutes.

Back in our room, we did our very best to make Paxton take a cheerful view. "There's the crown safe back," we said; "very likely you'd have done better not to touch it" (and he heavily assented to that), "but no real harm has been done, and we shall never give this away to anyone who would be so mad as to go near it. Besides, don't you feel better yourself? I don't mind confessing," I said, "that on the way there I was very much inclined to take your view about—well, about being followed; but going back, it wasn't at all the same thing, was it?" No, it wouldn't do: "*You've* nothing to trouble yourselves about," he said, "but I'm not forgiven. I've got to pay for that miserable sacrilege still. I know what you are going to say. The Church might help. Yes, but it's the body that has to suffer. It's true I'm not feeling that he's waiting outside for me just now. But——" Then he stopped. Then he turned to thanking us, and we put him off as soon as we could. And naturally we pressed him to use our sitting-room next day, and said we should be glad to go out with him. Or did he play golf, perhaps? Yes, he

did, but he didn't think he should care about that to-morrow. Well, we recommended him to get up late and sit in our room in the morning while we were playing, and we would have a walk later in the day. He was very submissive and *piano* about it all: ready to do just what we thought best, but clearly quite certain in his own mind that what was coming could not be averted or palliated. You'll wonder why we didn't insist on accompanying him to his home and seeing him safe into the care of brothers or someone. The fact was he had nobody. He had had a flat in town, but lately he had made up his mind to settle for a time in Sweden, and he had dismantled his flat and shipped off his belongings, and was whiling away a fortnight or three weeks before he made a start. Anyhow, we didn't see what we could do better than sleep on it—or not sleep very much, as was my case—and see what we felt like to-morrow morning.

We felt very different, Long and I, on as beautiful an April morning as you could desire; and Paxton also looked very different when we saw him at breakfast. "The first approach to a decent night I seem ever to have had," was what he said. But he was going to do as we had settled: stay in probably all the morning, and come out with us later. We went to the links; we met some other men and played with them in the morning, and had lunch there rather early, so as not to be late back. All the same, the snares of death overtook him.

Whether it could have been prevented, I don't know. I think he would have been got at somehow, do what we might. Anyhow, this is what happened.

We went straight up to our room. Paxton was there, reading quite peaceably. "Ready to come out shortly?" said Long, "say in half an hour's time?" "Certainly," he said: and I said we would change first, and perhaps have baths, and call for him in half an hour. I had my bath first, and went and lay down on my bed, and slept for about ten minutes. We came out of our rooms at the same time, and went together to the sitting-room. Paxton wasn't there—only his book. Nor was he in his room, nor in the downstairs rooms. We shouted for him. A servant



## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

came out and said: "Why, I thought you gentlemen was gone out already, and so did the other gentleman. He heard you a-calling from the path there, and run out in a hurry, and I looked out of the coffee-room window, but I didn't see you. 'Owever, he run off down the beach that way."

Without a word we ran that way too—it was the opposite direction to that of last night's expedition. It wasn't quite four o'clock, and the day was fair, though not so fair as it had been, so there was really no reason, you'd say, for anxiety: with people about, surely a man couldn't come to much harm.

But something in our look as we ran out must have struck the servant, for she came out on the steps, and pointed, and said, "Yes, that's the way he went." We ran on as far as the top of the shingle bank, and there pulled up. There was a choice of ways: past the houses on the sea-front, or along the sand at the bottom of the beach, which, the tide being now out, was fairly broad. Or of course we might keep along the shingle between these two tracks and have some view of both of them; only that was heavy going. We chose the sand, for that was the loneliest, and someone *might* come to harm there without being seen from the public path.

Long said he saw Paxton some distance ahead, running and waving his stick, as if he wanted to signal to people who were on ahead of him. I couldn't be sure: one of these sea-mists was coming up very quickly from the south. There was someone, that's all I could say. And there were tracks on the sand as of someone running who wore shoes; and there were other tracks made before those—for the shoes sometimes trod in them and interfered with them—of someone not in shoes. Oh, of course, it's only my word you've got to take for all this: Long's dead, we'd no time or means to make sketches or take casts, and the next tide washed everything away. All we could do was to notice these marks as we hurried on. But there they were over and over again, and we had no doubt whatever that what we saw was the track of a bare foot, and one that showed more bones than flesh.

The notion of Paxton running after—after anything like this, and supposing it to be the friends he was looking for, was very



dreadful to us. You can guess what we fancied: how the thing he was following might stop suddenly and turn round on him, and what sort of face it would show, half-seen at first in the mist—which all the while was getting thicker and thicker. And as I ran on wondering how the poor wretch could have been lured into mistaking that other thing for us, I remembered his saying, "He has some power over your eyes." And then I wondered what the end would be, for I had no hope now that the end could be averted, and—well, there is no need to tell all the dismal and horrid thoughts that flitted through my head as we ran on into the mist. It was uncanny, too, that the sun should still be bright in the sky and we could see nothing. We could only tell that we were now past the houses and had reached that gap there is between them and the old martello tower. When you are past the tower, you know, there is nothing but shingle for a long way—not a house, not a human creature, just that spit of land, or rather shingle, with the river on your right and the sea on your left.

But just before that, just by the martello tower, you remember there is the old battery, close to the sea. I believe there are only a few blocks of concrete left now: the rest has all been washed away, but at this time there was a lot more, though the place was a ruin. Well, when we got there, we clambered to the top as quick as we could to take breath and look over the shingle in front if by chance the mist would let us see anything. But a moment's rest we must have. We had run a mile at least. Nothing whatever was visible ahead of us, and we were just turning by common consent to get down and run hopelessly on, when we heard what I can only call a laugh: and if you can understand what I mean by a breathless, a lungless laugh, you have it: but I don't suppose you can. It came from below, and swerved away into the mist. That was enough. We bent over the wall. Paxton was there at the bottom.

You don't need to be told that he was dead. His tracks showed that he had run along the side of the battery, had turned sharp round the corner of it, and, small doubt of it, must have dashed

## A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

straight into the open arms of someone who was waiting there. His mouth was full of sand and stones, and his teeth and jaws were broken to bits. I only glanced once at his face.

At the same moment, just as we were scrambling down from the battery to get to the body, we heard a shout, and saw a man running down the bank of the martello tower. He was the caretaker stationed there, and his keen old eyes managed to descry through the mist that something was wrong. He had seen Paxton fall, and had seen us a moment after, running up—fortunate this, for otherwise we could hardly have escaped suspicion of being concerned in the dreadful business. Had he, we asked, caught sight of anybody attacking our friend? He could not be sure.

We sent him off for help, and stayed by the dead man till they came with the stretcher. It was then that we traced out how he had come, on the narrow fringe of sand under the battery wall. The rest was shingle, and it was hopelessly impossible to tell whither the other had gone.

What were we to say at the inquest? It was a duty, we felt, not to give up, there and then, the secret of the crown, to be published in every paper. I don't know how much you would have told; but what we did agree upon was this: to say that we had only made acquaintance with Paxton the day before, and that he had told us he was under some apprehension of danger at the hands of a man called William Ager. Also that we had seen some other tracks besides Paxton's when we followed him along the beach. But of course by that time everything was gone from the sands.

No one had any knowledge, fortunately, of any William Ager living in the district. The evidence of the man at the martello tower freed us from all suspicion. All that could be done was to return a verdict of wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.

Paxton was so totally without connections that all the inquiries that were subsequently made ended in a No Thoroughfare. And I have never been at Seaburgh, or even near it, since.



# The Voice in the Night

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WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

It was a dark, starless night. We were becalmed in the Northern Pacific. Our exact position I do not know; for the sun had been hidden during the course of a weary, breathless week, by a thin haze which had seemed to float above us, about the height of our mastheads, at times descending and shrouding the surrounding sea.

With there being no wind, we had steadied the tiller, and I was the only man on deck. The crew, consisting of two men and a boy, were sleeping forward in their den; while Will—my friend, and the master of our little craft—was aft in his bunk on the port side of the little cabin.

Suddenly, from out of the surrounding darkness, there came a hail:

“Schooner, ahoy!”

The cry was so unexpected that I gave no immediate answer, because of my surprise.

It came again—a voice curiously throaty and inhuman, calling from somewhere upon the dark sea away on our port broadside:

“Schooner, ahoy!”

“Hullo!” I sung out, having gathered my wits somewhat. “What are you? What do you want?”

“You need not be afraid,” answered the queer voice, having probably noticed some trace of confusion in my tone. “I am only an old—man.”

The pause sounded oddly; but it was only afterwards that it came back to me with any significance.



## THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

"Why don't you come alongside, then?" I queried somewhat snappishly; for I liked not his hinting at my having been a trifle shaken.

"I—I—can't. It wouldn't be safe. I——" The voice broke off, and there was silence.

"What do you mean?" I asked, growing more and more astonished. "Why not safe? Where are you?"

I listened for a moment; but there came no answer. And then, a sudden indefinite suspicion, of I knew not what, coming to me, I stepped swiftly to the binnacle, and took out the lighted lamp. At the same time, I knocked on the deck with my heel to waken Will. Then I was back at the side, throwing the yellow funnel of light out into the silent immensity beyond our rail. As I did so, I heard a slight, muffled cry, and then the sound of a splash as though someone had dipped oars abruptly. Yet I cannot say that I saw anything with certainty; save, it seemed to me, that with the first flash of the light, there had been something upon the waters, where now there was nothing.

"Hullo, there!" I called. "What foolery is this?"

But there came only the indistinct sounds of a boat being pulled away into the night.

Then I heard Will's voice, from the direction of the after scuttle:

"What's up, George?"

"Come here, Will!" I said.

"What is it?" he asked, coming across the deck.

I told him the queer thing which had happened. He put several questions; then, after a moment's silence, he raised his hands to his lips, and hailed:

"Boat, ahoy!"

From a long distance away there came back to us a faint reply, and my companion repeated his call. Presently, after a short period of silence, there grew on our hearing the muffled sound of oars; at which Will hailed again.

This time there was a reply:

"Put away the light."

## WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

"I'm damned if I will," I muttered; but Will told me to do as the voice bade, and I shoved it down under the bulwarks.

"Come nearer," he said, and the oar-strokes continued. Then, when apparently some half-dozen fathoms distant, they again ceased.

"Come alongside," exclaimed Will. "There's nothing to be frightened of aboard here!"

"Promise that you will not show the light?"

"What's to do with you," I burst out, "that you're so infernally afraid of the light?"

"Because——" began the voice, and stopped short.

"Because what?" I asked quickly.

Will put his hand on my shoulder.

"Shut up a minute, old man," he said, in a low voice. "Let me tackle him."

He leant more over the rail.

"See here, Mister," he said, "this is a pretty queer business, you coming upon us like this, right out in the middle of the blessed Pacific. How are we to know what sort of a hanky-panky trick you're up to? You say there's only one of you. How are we to know, unless we get a squint at you—eh? What's your objection to the light, anyway?"

As he finished, I heard the noise of the oars again, and then the voice came; but now from a greater distance, and sounding extremely hopeless and pathetic.

"I am sorry—sorry! I would not have troubled you, only I am hungry, and—so is she."

The voice died away, and the sound of the oars, dipping irregularly, was borne to us.

"Stop!" sung out Will. "I don't want to drive you away. Come back! We'll keep the light hidden, if you don't like it."

He turned to me:

"It's a damned queer rig, this; but I think there's nothing to be afraid of?"

There was a question in his tone, and I replied.



## THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

"No, I think the poor devil's been wrecked around here, and gone crazy."

The sound of the oars drew nearer.

"Shove that lamp back in the binnacle," said Will; then he leaned over the rail and listened. I replaced the lamp, and came back to his side. The dipping of the oars ceased some dozen yards distant.

"Won't you come alongside now?" asked Will in an even voice. "I have had the lamp put back in the binnacle."

"I—I cannot," replied the voice. "I dare not come nearer. I dare not even pay you for the—the provisions."

"That's all right," said Will, and hesitated. "You're welcome to as much grub as you can take——" Again he hesitated.

"You are very good," exclaimed the voice. "May God, Who understands everything, reward you——" It broke off huskily.

"The—the lady?" said Will abruptly. "Is she——"

"I have left her behind upon the island," came the voice.

"What island?" I cut in.

"I know not its name," returned the voice. "I would to God——!" it began, and checked itself as suddenly.

"Could we not send a boat for her?" asked Will at this point.

"No!" said the voice, with extraordinary emphasis. "My God! No!" There was a moment's pause; then it added, in a tone which seemed a merited reproach:

"It was because of our want I ventured—because her agony tortured me."

"I am a forgetful brute," exclaimed Will. "Just wait a minute, whoever you are, and I will bring you up something at once."

In a couple of minutes he was back again, and his arms were full of various edibles. He paused at the rail.

"Can't you come alongside for them?" he asked.

"No—I *dare not*," replied the voice, and it seemed to me that in its tones I detected a note of stifled craving—as though the owner hushed a mortal desire. It came to me then in a flash, that the poor old creature out there in the darkness was *suffering* for

## WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

actual need of that which Will held in his arms; and yet, because of some unintelligible dread, refraining from dashing to the side of our little schooner, and receiving it. And with the lightning-like conviction, there came the knowledge that the Invisible was not mad; but sanely facing some intolerable horror.

"Damn it, Will!" I said, full of many feelings, over which predominated a vast sympathy. "Get a box. We must float off the stuff to him in it."

This we did—propelling it away from the vessel, out into the darkness, by means of a boathook. In a minute, a slight cry from the Invisible came to us, and we knew that he had secured the box.

A little later, he called out a farewell to us, and so heartfelt a blessing, that I am sure we were the better for it. Then, without more ado, we heard the ply of oars across the darkness.

"Pretty soon off," remarked Will, with perhaps just a little sense of injury.

"Wait," I replied. "I think somehow he'll come back. He must have been badly needing that food."

"And the lady," said Will. For a moment he was silent; then he continued:

"It's the queerest thing ever I've tumbled across, since I've been fishing."

"Yes," I said, and fell to pondering.

And so the time slipped away—an hour, another, and still Will stayed with me; for the queer adventure had knocked all desire for sleep out of him.

The third hour was three parts through, when we heard again the sound of oars across the silent ocean.

"Listen!" said Will, a low note of excitement in his voice.

"He's coming, just as I thought," I muttered.

The dipping of the oars drew nearer, and I noted that the strokes were firmer and longer. The food had been needed.

They came to a stop a little distance off the broadside, and the queer voice came again to us through the darkness:

"Schooner, ahoy!"



## THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

"That you?" asked Will.

"Yes," replied the voice. "I left you suddenly; but—but there was great need."

"The lady?" questioned Will.

"The—lady is grateful now on earth. She will be more grateful soon in—in heaven."

Will began to make some reply, in a puzzled voice; but became confused, and broke off short. I said nothing. I was wondering at the curious pauses, and, apart from my wonder, I was full of a great sympathy.

The voice continued:

"We—she and I, have talked, as we shared the result of God's tenderness and yours——"

Will interposed, but without coherence.

"I beg of you not to—to belittle your deed of Christian charity this night," said the voice. "Be sure that it has not escaped His notice."

It stopped, and there was a full minute's silence. Then it came again:

"We have spoken together upon that which—which has befallen us. We had thought to go out, without telling any, of the terror which has come into our lives. She is with me in believing that tonight's happenings are under a special ruling, and that it is God's wish that we should tell to you all that we have suffered since—since——"

"Yes?" said Will softly.

"Since the sinking of the *Albatross*."

"Ah!" I exclaimed involuntarily. "She left Newcastle for 'Frisco some six months ago, and hasn't been heard of since."

"Yes," answered the voice. "But some few degrees to the North of the line she was caught in a terrible storm, and dismasted. When the day came, it was found that she was leaking badly, and, presently, it falling to a calm, the sailors took to the boats, leaving—leaving a young lady—my fiancée—and myself upon the wreck.

"We were below, gathering together a few of our belongings,

## WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

when they left. They were entirely callous, through fear, and when we came up upon the decks, we saw them only as small shapes afar off upon the horizon. Yet we did not despair, but set to work and constructed a small raft. Upon this we put such few matters as it would hold, including a quantity of water and some ship's biscuit. Then, the vessel being very deep in the water, we got ourselves on to the raft, and pushed off.

"It was later, when I observed that we seemed to be in the way of some tide or current, which bore us from the ship at an angle; so that in the course of three hours, by my watch, her hull became invisible to our sight, her broken masts remaining in view for a somewhat longer period. Then, towards evening, it grew misty, and so through the night. The next day we were still encompassed by the mist, the weather remaining quiet.

"For four days we drifted through this strange haze, until on the evening of the fourth day, there grew upon our ears the murmur of breakers at a distance. Gradually it became plainer, and, somewhat after midnight, it appeared to sound upon either hand at no very great space. The raft was raised upon a swell several times, and then we were in smooth water, and the noise of the breakers was behind.

"When the morning came, we found that we were in a sort of great lagoon; but of this we noticed little at the time; for close before us, through the enshrouding mist, loomed the hull of a large sailing-vessel. With one accord, we fell upon our knees and thanked God; for we thought that here was an end to our perils. We had much to learn.

"The raft drew near to the ship, and we shouted on them to take us aboard; but none answered. Presently the raft touched against the side of the vessel, and seeing a rope hanging downwards, I seized it and began to climb. Yet I had much ado to make my way up, because of a kind of grey, lichenous fungus which had seized upon the rope, and which blotched the side of the ship lividly.

"I reached the rail and clambered over it, on to the deck. Here I saw that the decks were covered, in great patches, with the



## THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

grey masses, some of them rising into nodules several feet in height; but at the time I thought less of this matter than of the possibility of there being people aboard the ship. I shouted; but none answered. Then I went to the door below the poop deck. I opened it, and peered in. There was a great smell of staleness, so that I knew in a moment that nothing living was within, and with the knowledge, I shut the door quickly; for I felt suddenly lonely.

"I went back to the side where I had scrambled up. My—my sweetheart was still sitting quietly upon the raft. Seeing me look down she called up to know whether there were any aboard of the ship. I replied that the vessel had the appearance of having been long deserted; but that if she would wait a little I would see whether there was anything in the shape of a ladder by which she could ascend to the deck. Then we would make a search through the vessel together. A little later, on the opposite side of the decks, I found a rope side-ladder. This I carried across, and a minute afterwards she was beside me.

"Together we explored the cabins and apartments in the after part of the ship; but nowhere was there any sign of life. Here and there, within the cabins themselves, we came across odd patches of that queer fungus; but this, as my sweetheart said, could be cleansed away.

"In the end, having assured ourselves that the after portion of the vessel was empty, we picked our ways to the bows, between the ugly grey nodules of that strange growth; and here we made a further search, which told us that there was indeed none aboard but ourselves.

"This being now beyond any doubt, we returned to the stern of the ship and proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Together we cleared out and cleaned two of the cabins; and after that I made examination whether there was anything eatable in the ship. This I soon found was so, and thanked God in my heart for His goodness. In addition to this I discovered the whereabouts of the fresh-water pump, and having fixed it I found the water drinkable, though somewhat unpleasant to the taste.



## WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

“For several days we stayed aboard the ship, without attempting to get to the shore. We were busily engaged in making the place habitable. Yet even thus early we became aware that our lot was even less to be desired than might have been imagined; for though, as a first step, we scraped away the odd patches of growth that studded the floors and walls of the cabins and saloon, yet they returned almost to their original size within the space of twenty-four hours, which not only discouraged us, but gave us a feeling of vague unease.

“Still we would not admit ourselves beaten, so set to work afresh, and not only scraped away the fungus, but soaked the places where it had been, with carbolic, a can-full of which I had found in the pantry. Yet, by the end of the week the growth had returned in full strength, and, in addition, it had spread to other places, as though our touching it had allowed germs from it to travel elsewhere.

“On the seventh morning, my sweetheart woke to find a small patch of it growing on her pillow, close to her face. At that, she came to me, so soon as she could get her garments upon her. I was in the galley at the time lighting the fire for breakfast.

“ ‘Come here, John,’ she said, and led me aft. When I saw the thing upon her pillow I shuddered, and then and there we agreed to go right out of the ship and see whether we could not fare to make ourselves more comfortable ashore.

“Hurriedly we gathered together our few belongings, and even among these I found that the fungus had been at work; for one of her shawls had a little lump of it growing near one edge. I threw the whole thing over the side, without saying anything to her.

“The raft was still alongside, but it was too clumsy to guide, and I lowered down a small boat that hung across the stern, and in this we made our way to the shore. Yet, as we drew near to it, I became gradually aware that here the vile fungus, which had driven us from the ship, was growing riot. In places it rose into horrible, fantastic mounds, which seemed almost to quiver, as with a quiet life, when the wind blew across them. Here and

## THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

there it took on the forms of vast fingers, and in others it just spread out flat and smooth and treacherous. Odd places, it appeared as grotesque stunted trees, seeming extraordinarily kinked and gnarled—the whole quaking vilely at times.

“At first, it seemed to us that there was no single portion of the surrounding shore which was not hidden beneath the masses of the hideous lichen; yet, in this, I found we were mistaken; for somewhat later, coasting along the shore at a little distance, we descried a smooth white patch of what appeared to be fine sand, and there we landed. It was not sand. What it was I do not know. All that I have observed is that upon it the fungus will not grow; while everywhere else, save where the sand-like earth wanders oddly, pathwise, amid the grey desolation of the lichen, there is nothing but that loathsome greyness.

“It is difficult to make you understand how cheered we were to find one place that was absolutely free from the growth, and here we deposited our belongings. Then we went back to the ship for such things as it seemed to us we should need. Among other matters, I managed to bring ashore with me one of the ship’s sails, with which I constructed two small tents, which, though exceedingly rough-shaped, served the purposes for which they were intended. In these we lived and stored our various necessities, and thus for a matter of some four weeks all went smoothly and without particular unhappiness. Indeed, I may say with much of happiness—for—for we were together.

“It was on the thumb of her right hand that the growth first showed. It was only a small circular spot, much like a little grey mole. My God! how the fear leapt to my heart when she showed me the place. We cleansed it between us, washing it with carbolic and water. In the morning of the following day she showed her hand to me again. The grey warty thing had returned. For a little while, we looked at one another in silence. Then, still wordless, we started again to remove it. In the midst of the operation she spoke suddenly.

“‘What’s that on the side of your face, dear?’ Her voice was sharp with anxiety. I put my hand up to feel.



## WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

“ ‘There! Under the hair by your ear. A little to the front a bit.’ My finger rested upon the place, and then I knew.

“ ‘Let us get your thumb done first,’ I said. And she submitted only because she was afraid to touch me until it was cleansed. I finished washing and disinfecting her thumb, and then she turned to my face. After it was finished we sat together and talked a-while of many things; for there had come into our lives sudden, very terrible thoughts. We were, all at once, afraid of something worse than death. We spoke of loading the boat with provisions and water and making our way out on to the sea; yet we were helpless, for many causes, and—and the growth had attacked us already. We decided to stay. God would do with us what was His will. We would wait.

“A month, two months, three months passed and the places grew somewhat, and there had come others. Yet we fought so strenuously with the fear that its headway was but slow, comparatively speaking.

“Occasionally we ventured off to the ship for such stores as we needed. There we found that the fungus grew persistently. One of the nodules on the maindeck became soon as high as my head.

“We had now given up all thought or hope of leaving the island. We had realized that it would be unallowable to go among healthy humans, with the thing from which we were suffering.

“With this determination and knowledge in our minds we knew that we should have to husband our food and water; for we did not know, at that time, but that we should possibly live for many years.

“This reminds me that I have told you that I am an old man. Judged by years this is not so. But—but——”

He broke off; then continued somewhat abruptly:

“As I was saying, we knew that we should have to use care in the matter of food. But we had no idea then how little food there was left, of which to take care. It was a week later that I made the discovery that all the other bread tanks—which I had supposed full—were empty, and that (beyond odd tins of vegetables



## THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

and meat, and some other matters) we had nothing on which to depend, but the bread in the tank which I had already opened.

"After learning this I bestirred myself to do what I could, and set to work at fishing in the lagoon; but with no success. At this I was somewhat inclined to feel desperate until the thought came to me to try outside the lagoon, in the open sea.

"Here, at times, I caught odd fish; but so infrequently that they proved of but little help in keeping us from the hunger which threatened. It seemed to me that our deaths were likely to come by hunger, and not by the growth of the thing which had seized upon our bodies.

"We were in this state of mind when the fourth month wore out. Then I made a very horrible discovery. One morning, a little before midday, I came off from the ship with a portion of the biscuits which were left. In the mouth of her tent I saw my sweetheart sitting, eating something.

" 'What is it, my dear?' I called out as I leapt ashore. Yet, on hearing my voice, she seemed confused, and, turning, slyly threw something towards the edge of the little clearing. It fell short, and a vague suspicion having arisen within me, I walked across and picked it up. It was a piece of the grey fungus.

"As I went to her with it in my hand, she turned deadly pale, then a rose red.

"I felt strangely dazed and frightened.

" 'My dear! My dear!' I said, and could say no more. Yet at my words she broke down and cried bitterly. Gradually, as she calmed, I got from her the news that she had tried it the preceding day, and—and liked it. I got her to promise on her knees not to touch it again, however great our hunger. After she had promised she told me that the desire for it had come suddenly, and that, until the moment of desire, she had experienced nothing towards it but the most extreme repulsion.

"Later in the day, feeling strangely restless, and much shaken with the thing which I had discovered, I made my way along one of the twisted paths—formed by the white, sand-like substance—which led among the fungoid growth. I had, once before,

ventured along there; but not to any great distance. This time, being involved in perplexing thought, I went much further than hitherto.

“Suddenly I was called to myself by a queer hoarse sound on my left. Turning quickly I saw that there was movement among an extraordinarily shaped mass of fungus, close to my elbow. It was swaying uneasily, as though it possessed life of its own. Abruptly, as I stared, the thought came to me that the thing had a grotesque resemblance to the figure of a distorted human creature. Even as the fancy flashed into my brain, there was a slight, sickening noise of tearing, and I saw that one of the branch-like arms was detaching itself from the surrounding grey masses, and coming towards me. The head of the thing—a shapeless grey ball, inclined in my direction. I stood stupidly, and the vile arm brushed across my face. I gave out a frightened cry, and ran back a few paces. There was a sweetish taste upon my lips where the thing had touched me. I licked them, and was immediately filled with an inhuman desire. I turned and seized a mass of the fungus. Then more, and—more. I was insatiable. In the midst of devouring, the remembrance of the morning’s discovery swept into my mazed brain. It was sent by God. I dashed the fragment I held to the ground. Then, utterly wretched and feeling a dreadful guiltiness, I made my way back to the little encampment.

“I think she knew, by some marvellous intuition which love must have given, so soon as she set eyes on me. Her quiet sympathy made it easier for me, and I told her of my sudden weakness; yet omitted to mention the extraordinary thing which had gone before. I desired to spare her all unnecessary terror.

“But for myself, I had added an intolerable knowledge, to breed an incessant terror in my brain; for I doubted not but that I had seen the end of one of those men who had come to the island in the ship in the lagoon; and in that monstrous ending I had seen our own.

“Thereafter we kept from the abominable food, though the desire for it had entered into our blood. Yet our drear punish-



## THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

ment was upon us; for, day by day, with monstrous rapidity, the fungoid growth took hold of our poor bodies. Nothing we could do would check it materially, and so—and so—we who had been human, became—— Well, it matters less each day. Only—only we had been man and maid!

“And day by day the fight is more dreadful, to withstand the hunger-lust for the terrible lichen.

“A week ago we ate the last of the biscuit, and since that time I have caught three fish. I was out here fishing tonight when your schooner drifted upon me out of the mist. I hailed you. You know the rest, and may God, out of his great heart, bless you for your goodness to a—a couple of poor outcast souls.”

There was the dip of an oar—another. Then the voice came again, and for the last time, sounding through the slight surrounding mist, ghostly and mournful.

“God bless you! Good-bye!”

“Good-bye,” we shouted together, hoarsely, our hearts full of many emotions.

I glanced about me. I became aware that the dawn was upon us.

The sun flung a stray beam across the hidden sea; pierced the mist dully, and lit up the receding boat with a gloomy fire. Indistinctly I saw something nodding between the oars. I thought of a sponge—a great, grey nodding sponge—— The oars continued to ply. They were grey—as was the boat—and my eyes searched a moment vainly for the conjunction of hand and oar. My gaze flashed back to the—head. It nodded forward as the oars went backward for the stroke. Then the oars were dipped, the boat shot out of the patch of light, and the—the thing went nodding into the mist.



# Time-Fuse

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JOHN METCALFE

I

Miss Moody, when Eddie Fisk had gone, sat at her table in the sewing-room looking over the papers about Spiritualism which he had left.

She had large, masculine hands, knuckles slightly swollen by rheumatism, and heavy, painstaking thumbs. Her movements, as she shook the papers together into a neat pile on her left and transferred each, as soon as she had glanced through it, to an equally neat pile on her right, were methodical with a sort of restrained hopelessness. Now and again, however, her expression quickened. She breathed noisily and her eyes grew luminous with interest. Mr. Fisk had given her an *Occult Review*, some copies of *Light* and a sheaf of propagandist broadsides entitled collectively *The Other Side*. There would not be time for her to do more than skim this literature during the week-end, yet Eddie would unreasonably expect her to know all about it before Monday evening's séance. She frowned vaguely and sighed, laying the last broadside carefully upon the pile. Her face was long, sombre, rather equine in cast, and with a look of despondent fidelity which certainly supported the resemblance to a horse. Mr. Fisk, indeed, had made a more recherché comparison. Returning with his brother Gilbert from the north-west of Canada, he had decided that his former landlady reminded him of a bull-moose. Of this Miss Moody had suspected nothing.

Before the War, Eddie and Gilbert, with a third brother, Morris, had been her first "guests" in the house on Gordon

## TIME-FUSE

Square. Originally a dressmaker, Miss Moody, on her father's death, had been enabled to lease the entire premises of which she had till then inhabited a single floor, and that the highest and most inconvenient. Reserving these old apartments for her own continued use, she had converted the remainder into a boarding establishment, enlisting in this venture the co-operation of her widowed sister, Janet Phillimore, who performed the offices of cook. During some strenuous but modestly remunerative dozen years the two of them had entertained successfully (as the "Remarks Book" in the hall would show) more than two thousand gratefully admiring gentlemen, and—by exception only it would seem, the difference in the totals being so pronounced—close on one hundred of their wives and families.

For "Gentlemen," indeed, Miss Moody's preference was fixed. She was large-hearted, awkward, incapable of finesse or any shade of cattiness. Her boarders, beginning usually by laughing at her raw-boned frame and at that curious, dark-muzzled looking face of hers, would end by feeling for her something like affection, at the least, respect. "A good sort," "A good creature," "One of the best." . . . A few of them, like the brothers Fisk, would even call her "Ellen" and be admitted to the intimacy of the upper floor where she had practised, long ago, her trade of dressmaking. Here, in the sitting-room, there still remained a sewing-machine, and, by the window-seat, a pair of dress forms. These latter were a standing joke between Miss Moody and her visitors. Eddie, particularly, was used to swear at them. Their extreme air of tepid ladylikeness extending upwards till the neck was reached, but ending there in neuter horror of a black polished knob, would almost always move him to profanity. Janet, whilst generally approving of her sister's friends, could wish that Eddie's language were a little more restrained and, a more serious count, that he would cease to worry Ellen with those everlasting trashy books. . . .

Unitarianism, Theosophy, the Ethical Church, Vegetarianism, the Yogi breathing system, Taoism and now Spiritism. Ellen was always getting bitten by the virus of some new and foolish



cult and mazing her poor wits with it. She was vulnerable to strange religions as other people are to measles or to chickenpox, and Eddie, far from checking her or talking sensibly, persisted, on the contrary, in humouring her fantastic whims. He would laugh almost openly at all these fads himself, yet by some curious quirk of character appeared to find amusement in making her their dupe. Ellen meanwhile continued, muddled, yet dumbly confident of "something in" these far-fetched creeds, constantly being disappointed in each one yet always hopefully proceeding to the next.

For Gilbert, Janet had far greater tolerance. Gilbert was tall, commanding, with a hearty breeziness, "much more of a man," she thought, than Eddie, who behaved clownishly and had a reedy voice. Neither Eddie nor Gilbert were "boarders" any longer, having embarked on business in a hide and tannery concern which lay too far away at Kennington. Both of them, however, would drop in every now and then as time and opportunities allowed. Eddie especially, since he had taken up with Spiritism and found that he had mediumistic powers, was always coming with fresh tracts and booklets to the house.

Of the third brother, Morris, none of them, least of all Miss Moody, cared to speak. Amongst a long and constantly extending series of "soft spots," this one, and even after he was dead, remained the softest still. Unconfessedly, it was the obstinately painful memory of Morris Fisk which, more than anything, provided impetus for those researches into Spiritism which Janet so deplored. Morris, quieter than the other two, with a reserve and gentleness of manner likely at first to be mistaken for timidity, had come to say good-bye to Ellen before he went off to the War, and given her his photo. His eyes had held a dumb, startled look of suffering. As he was finally descending the front stairs and passing through the "lounge" into the hall he had shaken hands with her three times, but whether out of absentmindedness or no she could not quite be sure.

Now, as Miss Moody finished the perusal of her "literature" and slowly crossed the room to poke the fire, she wondered how



## TIME-FUSE

it was that Morris had got killed. Nobody knew exactly, or, at any rate, Eddie, when she questioned him, had appeared loth to say. Eddie was disappointing in some ways. After the last séance, held some few days ago and in this very room, Ellen had asked him, had he, perhaps . . . had he got any message? And Eddie had looked curious, confused, almost displeased. Surely that was unreasonable. Surely with that miracle of disappearing flowers fresh in every mind it wasn't so preposterous that she should imagine he had heard from Morris. . . .

It was six o'clock. The March evening was cold. It was getting dark. She would have to go downstairs and look in on Janet in the kitchen. But before descending she returned to the table and glanced once more at one of the leaflets. It was an account of the life and mediumship of Daniel Home. Mr. Home, as everybody knew, had been a genuine and wonderfully gifted medium, and carried glowing coals upon his head and held them in his hands. Her eyes lit and her breathing became rapid. Somehow, though Ellen could not have explained this to herself, she felt that if she, too, could emulate this feat, if she herself could do a thing like that, then something in her brain that troubled her would be resolved and pacified, disproved or proved. She would feel better about Morris Fisk.

## II

"Well," said Janet, "even if those flowers did vanish, and I'm not actually saying they didn't, what does it prove? It proves they vanished, that's all. And what good does that do? Does it help us to run this boarding-house any better, I should like to know?"

"Oh, but—it proves a lot of things, if you think far enough. It proves . . ." Ellen hesitated, suddenly losing what it had been in her mind to say. Whenever Janet "pounced" on her like this she became flustered and unable to go on. She ended lamely: "It proves that there are other laws we don't know anything about. Eddie was saying that it proved a fourth dimension."

Janet was shorter than her sister, crisper and sharper tongued,

with black hair, thick eyebrows, and a complexion harshly reddened by twelve years of cooking. She removed the stove-lid with a clatter, set a large saucepan in its place, then turned and said contemptuously: "A fourth dimension, eh? When I can see and smell it I'll believe in it. What does it *do*? If it'd help to keep the oven hot, or stop my face from getting scorched . . . !"

Miss Moody, unequal to the contest, retreated sadly from the kitchen. Not only was she incapable of reasoning with Janet in these moods, but it was certainly not fitting that such arguments should be conducted before little Agatha, the scullery-maid. Besides, there had been something in her sister's last remarks which curiously discomposed her. It had been funny that she had said that about the fire scorching her!

Supper was over, and Ellen paused for a few moments in the "lounge" to talk with Mr. Brace. The Braces, man and wife, had now been "permanents" for seven months. Mr. Brace was a very old, bald-headed gentleman retired from the retail hosiery profession, but his wife was much younger, with blondined hair, hardly middle-aged, and occasionally quite pretty. Both had been present at the séance.

"Coming upstairs on Monday? Yes, of course we'll come, though, mind you, we don't swallow *all* we're told. Too high-fly in his ways, your friend, for me. Too joky. And those disappearing flowers. . . I'm too hardheaded, I suppose. Still, we'll be glad to come."

Miss Moody passed upstairs to her own floor. The Braces, though still sceptical, were genial and not contemptuous like Janet. Talk with them had somewhat re-established her. She took up some sewing from a chair and brought it underneath the light. Janet would come up presently to retire for the night, and Agatha, who now "slept in" on a camp bed in the adjoining room, but for a while she had the evening to herself.

As she sewed, she thought over old Mr. Brace's words concerning Eddie. His comments, she regretfully admitted, had upon the whole been just. Eddie, as an advocate, was not convincing. That was his way. His manner was too often flippant



## TIME-FUSE

and facetious. Yet, if the thing were true, it remained true however Eddie acted, even if he did not entirely believe in it himself. One could have powers of which one was not worthy. But if you *were* sincere, if you *were* worthy, surely that would mean greater power still.

Miss Moody rose to fetch a thimble and caught her reflection in the glass. A darting remembrance of something which Mr. Brace had said about her hair distracted her and made her smile. He had made some impudent though evidently complimentary remark for which his wife pretended to rebuke him. "Goddiver," what was that? Old sauce-pot—and at his age too! Ellen's hair was copious, brown and lustrous, her single beauty. She patted it, and her smile grew broader, emphasising large teeth and rather exposed gums. "Oo, hoo—he has a cheek—but he's a nice old thing!" A short, gruff laugh escaped her, and she performed an awkward pirouetting motion. Occasionally, when unexpected flattery made her bashful, she had a way of flushing suddenly and mildly teetering, tricks which although ingratiating and coquettish in her early girlhood, were now an inappropriate survival.

Presently she resumed her sewing. Up here it was usually very quiet, but to-night there was a wind, sprung up since supper-time, rattling the panes and making curious yawning noises round the eaves. It blew, all at once, down the chimney, puffing a cloud of smoke into the room. An ember fell into the grate. Ellen, sneezing violently, stared at it fixedly some moments. Its bright redness dulled, changed as she watched to a dead grey. Yet it would still be much too hot to touch.

Her thoughts turned once again to Mr. Home. What had that booklet said? Though she had only scanned it cursorily she found that she was able to remember certain phrases word for word. "Home, in the presence of witnesses whose probity and public records placed them beyond suspicion of collusion in any form of trickery, on several occasions thrust his hand amidst the red-hot coals and, withdrawing some of them from the fire, set them upon his head. This amazing performance was attended by



no pain or other ill-effects and neither his hands nor scalp showed the slightest trace of any burn." Miss Moody sighed sharply. Accounts of such an exploit captivated and at the same time terrified her. The mirror before which she had stood a few minutes ago to admire her hair was opposite her still, and for a second she could see a look almost of suffering on her face. To banish it she forced herself to smile, then dropped her glance and shifted her position slightly from the fire.

Faith, it was faith, she knew, that had enabled him to perform miracles like that. With enough faith one could do anything. Even she, Ellen. . . . Her lips parted and she caught her breath. She felt tortured. "Oh God, give me faith . . . !" That was all right, to pray to God for faith. The Spiritualists believed in Him. But fire—she was more terrified of fire than anything. And Janet's disbelief made it more difficult. It had been Janet all along who had prevented her from being what she might. . . .

Suddenly she started, checking a cry. She had, whilst thinking about Mr. Home, mechanically continued sewing, and now her glance, becoming less abstracted, fixed itself in surprise upon her needle. She stared at it frozenly. The threaded eye was visible outside the thumb of her left hand that held her work; the other end, the point, projected perhaps half an inch upon the inner side, towards the fingers.

Then she had pricked herself—driven the needle, seemingly, right through her thumb. Yet she felt nothing. She could not believe it. For some seconds she stared, and then, hesitantly, began to draw the needle out and backwards. Yes, true enough, it must almost have grazed the bone. It was out now, and blood was flowing, though not copiously. How was it that it didn't hurt?

She rose from her chair, conscious all at once of a peculiar numbness. But the numbness was not mere absence of sensation. It was something, a positive something, charging, filling her. She could feel it rapidly invading her, extending itself outwards from the centre of her body towards her head and hands and feet. In stages, like the beating of a pulse or like a clock. . . . As if,



## TIME-FUSE

inside of her, numbers were being counted, very quickly, numbers that mounted up a scale to a predestined figure. And there was silence. The noise of the wind in the road had ceased, was lost to her. Within her brain as well was silence, more profound. When the counting was over and the final number reached, the silence would be absolute. Then, Ellen knew, she could do anything.

Now. She bent, put out a hand towards the fire.

She saw her fingers in the flames, moving among the coals. She pulled out two or three of these, red-hot, transferred them to her other hand. Her sleeves were short, and for a while she drew the embers up and down her lower arms. Finally she pressed them to her cheeks, placed them upon her head.

The door was being slowly pushed ajar. Someone was peering in. Agatha. Miss Moody, though she had not heard the sounds of her approach nor yet her knock, could clearly see, at first, the look of wild incomprehension on her face.

"Come in, Agatha, and shut the door." Ellen was not sure whether her voice, level and calm and reassuring as she hoped, were audible or no.

Agatha's eyes had now grown wide in horror. She was opening her mouth to scream.

### III

Ellen, wrapped in her dressing-gown, was sitting up in bed. It was Sunday morning and nearly eleven o'clock, but she had no intention of rising till the afternoon. Janet, after her first bewildered "What, not getting up? Do you feel ill?" had gone her way downstairs without another word, probably quite convinced that to account for this unprecedented state of things her sister must have something seriously wrong with her. She had ascended later with the breakfast tray. "Well, anyhow, your appetite's quite good. It seems I needn't fetch the doctor after all. . . ." She was evidently prepared to be indignant and sarcastic, but on meeting Miss Moody's glance thought better of it. Her own eyes, usually so sharp and menacing under their thick brows, had lowered suddenly as if she were afraid.

No, certainly, Miss Moody didn't need the doctor. All that she wanted now was rest, and leisure to think over what had happened on the previous evening, that miracle of which the only witness had as yet been Agatha, but whose reality would presently be wonderingly admitted by the world. Meanwhile she sat and listened to the church bells ringing down the road, their peals confused and muted, at moments altogether silenced by the still unabated clamour of the wind.

"I, Ellen Moody, am possessed of superhuman powers." She had tried to explain as much to Agatha when the latter had recovered from her faint, though rather unsuccessfully, she feared. After replacing the embers on the fire she had lifted the little scullery-maid from the floor where she had fallen by the door, laid her upon the sofa and hastened to fetch brandy from the cupboard.

But Agatha, when with difficulty revived, had only stared at her in horror for an instant and then mutely turned away, upon the verge, as was too obvious, of a fresh collapse. She had been sick three times since then, so Ellen learned, but had, it seemed, said nothing of what she had seen to Janet or to anybody else.

That was as well. Janet, though curious as to the cause of Agatha's indisposition, would certainly not credit it if she were told. She had come up, grumblingly, a little later, as Ellen had been getting into bed and rated her for "pampering" people in hysterics. And now, this morning, left short-handed in the kitchen and with nobody but herself to superintend the running of the whole establishment, her temper would undoubtedly be worse than ever.

But before long Janet would know. She, too, like Agatha, would understand. Not yet, not till to-morrow evening at the séance. Miss Moody raised herself against the pillows, took a long, deep breath. She would attempt nothing till then. That, something told her, would be wise, respectful of the power given her. She must have time to think, to know this different self that now she was, to fit herself again. . . . And, while she waited, she was anxious to be undisturbed, not have to talk to anyone, not



even Agatha. Indeed, for some obscure reason that evaded her, she wanted Agatha the least of all.

Later in the day, after dinner, she got up and came downstairs. There were concerned enquiries from the Braces, from all her other boarders. Had she been ill, and was she better now? Janet, upon the point, she saw, of bursting into protest, looked at her curiously and changed her mind. Ellen knew why. She knew now that she was different. Already they as well could apprehend this difference, all of them. She felt a confident languor, expanding, filling her. She was shining at them, at everybody who came near to her.

Tea over, she once more retired to her bedroom and spent the remainder of the evening in looking over Eddie's papers. Poor Eddie, he was in some ways to be pitied, yet he, too, had powers. She must not forget that. She must be grateful to him even in his ignorance and flippancy, for showing her, for pointing out the path. It was only after she had seen him make those flowers disappear that she had had the faith. . . .

And for the sake of Morris. . . .

She looked at herself intently in the mirror. "I, Ellen Moody. . . ."

## IV

Agatha had packed her trunk and left. Miss Moody could still see her small, scared face as she had passed her on the stairs. Janet had been outraged. What was wrong with the girl? She must be made to stop another week at least, to give notice properly. But Ellen, though she was sorry to see Agatha depart, said no. Let her go. It was no use to keep her if she didn't want to stay.

That had been early in the morning, and now it was afternoon. Monday afternoon, and not so very long before the séance. Miss Moody went about her work as usual, saw that the tea, for such as wanted it, was set out on the little copper-covered tables in the lounge, added accounts, made out a bill or two, and interviewed the plumbers who had come to fix the wash-bowl taps in

## JOHN METCALFE

number eight. At supper she presided with her customary cheerfulness, rallying Mr. Brace upon the vaunted "hardness" of his head. "Well, well, we'll see. I'm not that bigoted. If the thing's not a fraud I'm quite agreeable to be convinced. Look here—if I could only get a line on Sammy Price, who got his ticket in a motor smash last year. . . . He owed me forty pound. . . ."

Old Mr. Brace was really terrible, and Ellen should not have encouraged him. His wife didn't like it, nor, it was plain, did Janet, who, though responsible for preparation of the meals, was usually able to sit down to them beside her sister. Her frowns, however, were without effect upon Miss Moody. Ellen had hitherto refrained from talk of Spiritualism or other cults in public, but for to-night felt careless of offence. What if it *were* "bad taste" or impolitic—what if some of them didn't like it? Perhaps a few, who hadn't heard of it, might become interested, wish to join the séance.

Shortly after half-past eight a thunderous tattoo on the front door, executed in the rhythm of the "Policeman's Holiday," indicated the arrival of Eddie. He entered, carrying a large, box-shaped object, something like a botanical press, bound with two leather straps. When he had exchanged greetings with Miss Moody he humorously extended a little finger towards Mr. Brace, who had walked out with her into the hall. Mr. Brace, having gravely shaken the finger, tapped on the box. "Family keeping well I trust, sir?" he enquired waggishly. "Not giving any trouble?"

Eddie smiled and shook his head. "No, thank you, Grandad. Family's O.K. Sophronia gamma's got a little flighty since she's been acting as control to Gertie Gush the movie star, that's all. Otherwise in the pink."

Mr. Fisk was short, fair and dapper with a tiny blond moustache. He had sharp, restless eyes of a shallow grey and was a little overdressed, wearing a blue silk waistcoat with enamel buttons, and cloth-topped, patent-leather shoes. His feet were very small.

"All of us ready?" he asked Ellen, casting a glance beyond her



towards the lounge. "Gilbert's so sorry that he couldn't come. He's got a cold."

"Yes, we're all ready." Miss Moody had turned and made a signalling motion with one hand. Mrs. Brace and four or five others had detached themselves with an attempted air of casualness from the remainder of the company and now were wending their way rather sheepishly into the hall. Two of them—gentlemen who had not assisted at the previous séances—Mr. Brace introduced very carefully to Mr. Fisk, as if he thought that Eddie might explode. Somebody uttered an embarrassed laugh.

"Well, shall we go upstairs?" Miss Moody headed the procession, with Janet, more than usually sour, bringing up the rear. Mr. Brace, the irrepressible, offered to carry Eddie's box.

"Oh, no, you don't. My ladies don't like strangers. . . ." Ellen, hearing this badinage behind her, turned and spoke rebukefully. "Now, please, we must be serious. . . ."

Eddie, as soon as they were all collected in the room, briskly began to tell them off upon his fingers. "Eight of us, four ladies and four gentlemen. That's very nice. We'll sit the same as we arranged last week, alternately. Miss Moody here, by me, Miss Winter there, then Mr. Tharp and Mrs. Phillimore. . . . We want another chair or two, I think. . . ." He distributed the company in a circle round the table. "Now . . . well, we might as well begin. P'r'aps Mrs. Phillimore would be so good as to turn off the light."

With the extinction of the light Ellen was conscious of a thrill. It was dark, but not entirely so, for a dull glow shone redly from the fire. Young Mr. Simpson, one of the two newcomers, spoke diffidently: "Hadn't we better put a screen in front?" How rapidly the general atmosphere of eeriness had told on him was evident in his voice. His tones were almost reverent.

"Oh no, it's not enough to matter . . . but we ought really to have music, a piano or something. . . . I get started easier . . . it's a pity. . . ." Mr. Brace gave a sudden cough, and then, as if afraid that it had sounded sceptical, repeated it more sympathetically. Miss Moody was just able to see Eddie's face. Though not, as he was careful to explain, a "trance" medium in

## JOHN METCALFE

the strictest sense, it was his custom to "go off" a little at the commencement of a séance. He had now closed his eyes, was fidgeting upon his chair. "You know, it takes a little while to come. Some nights I'm good and some I'm bad. It all depends upon conditions. I mean, it's more than simply turning on a tap. . . ." Ellen had heard all these preliminary remarks before. Presently he would begin to sway slightly, and his thin voice would take on a sing-song quality. Yes, it was getting like that now.

"Ah. . . ." He sat up, drew in his breath sharply. "Mrs. Brace, do you mind giving me your hand? Thank you, I—— The name George is given me. Elderly man, well past the middle age, medium height, eyes very dark. . . . Passed over several years ago. . . . I get a fullness here, a sort of tightness, painful. . . ." Eddie had placed his other hand upon his chest. "Was it pneumonia—or bronchitis?"

"No, lung trouble, consumption. He passed over seven years ago, in 1920."

"Then you recognise the name and the description?"

"Well, yes, I think so. Only his name was Geoffrey—and he wasn't very old."

"An elder brother, perhaps?"

"Well, no," said Mrs. Brace, confused, "he was younger, a younger brother. . . ." After a short pause she enquired timidly, "Does he . . . is there any message?"

"Yes," replied Eddie. "He says . . . wait, I must catch it clearly—he says, what you are passing through just now is only for a time, not long. You are to have strength and courage."

"Oh, thank you." Mrs. Brace withdrew her hand, retired gratefully into obscurity.

It went on. Next Mr. Simpson, after him Miss Winter, Mr. Brace . . . Eddie had messages to-night it seemed for everyone but Ellen and her sister. That there were none for her Miss Moody was not sorry. Usually she would be breathlessly absorbed in all that Mr. Fisk would say and do, but now . . . She was nervous, impatient, wished he would "get on." She was



looking forward to and yet half dreading what was to happen after he had done. None of them knew, not Janet and not Eddie, what she had got in store. Morris perhaps? Her throat grew dry. Perhaps . . . ?

Mr. Fisk was talking, this time in his natural voice. The light had been turned on, and he was smiling guardedly, wiping his face at intervals with a blue handkerchief. The sitting had exhausted him. Janet, endeavouring to look at him sarcastically, blinked suddenly and gave a formidable sneeze.

"And now," said Eddie, "we're just going to try the slate trick."

Ellen wished that he would not be so profane, and that his manner and appearance were less "chirpy," sparrow-like. Of course, his calling things a "trick" was just his way, but Mr. Brace, for instance—he would be certain not to understand. He would be sure to think. . . .

Mr. Brace, however, had to confess himself completely mystified. From his box Eddie produced what seemed to be an ordinary school slate and fragment of slate pencil. He and Mr. Brace, now sitting opposite each other, held up the slate securely pressed against the table's under side, the pencil having first been introduced between the two. Mr. Simpson had previously been persuaded to write a "question" on a slip of paper which he had folded up and put into his pocket. After a few moments a faint scratching sound was heard which continued for perhaps half a minute. When it ceased the slate was removed and the writing on it compared with that upon the paper. Mr. Simpson's question had been, trivially, "How many buttons are there on my suit?" to which the answer ran: "Add the numbers of the year of your birth." As Mr. Simpson had been born in 1899 this gave the total twenty-seven, a figure which, if trousers were included, he admitted to be accurate.

"There then," said Eddie, beaming, "you got more than you asked for, didn't you? You see, it's extra proof to answer you that way. None of us knew the year when you were born."

"'M," muttered Mr. Brace. "It's very clever, very clever. I'll

admit you've got me shaky. And it's been most interesting. I'm sure we're all exceedingly obliged."

"Oh, but," said Ellen. "We aren't going yet. It's hardly half-past nine. I was so hoping that you'd do the flower tr—experiment again."

She flushed, annoyed that she herself had barely escaped saying "trick". But that was Eddie's fault. "I'm sure we've lots of time," she went on hastily to cover her confusion, "and I was so looking forward . . ."

In her own voice she caught a strange anxiety, excitement. Eddie, too, for some reason, appeared all at once put out of countenance and ruffled, unwilling to comply with her request. "'Fraid it'll make me a bit late. You know I'm right across the river now."

## v

Ellen faced him, feeling her cheeks grow hot. "Oh, but it wouldn't take so long as that. Hardly a minute."

She wondered. Why did she insist so vehemently? Was it because that miracle of disappearing flowers had first persuaded and convinced her, given her the faith to do what she herself had done two days ago?

Eddie was still demurring. "Rather rushed to-night. There's Gilbert ill. And then, I haven't got the apparatus handy . . ."

"Tut, tut," said Mr. Brace, although benevolently, "his 'apparatus'! Really, that sounds bad."

"Nonsense," said Eddie, reddening. "We wanted apparatus for the thing we did just now, if you call slates and pencils apparatus. That doesn't make it any less—less genuine. Next time we'll do the flower stunt and everything. And the direct voice, too—if you don't call a trumpet too much of an apparatus."

"'M," said Mr. Brace again, now slightly less benevolent and evidently inclined to grow contentious. "All right, young man. No doubt you know what programme suits you best. But all the same if I remember right all that you needed when you worked that little piece of mystery before was just an ordinary cut-glass



vase and three geraniums. At least, that's all that anybody saw . . ."

"All right!" Eddie was now exasperated, smiling but finding it a little difficult to keep his temper. "Of course . . . if you intend to *challenge* me. . . . Of course, to you, I suppose, there's nothing in conditions. A vase is just a vase and flowers flowers. . . . I'll try it, but if it doesn't happen to come off, then don't blame me."

He had resumed his seat, lips pursed. Janet had brought a vase containing six carnations from the adjoining room.

"Lights out, I s'pose?" said Mr. Brace sardonically.

"Yes please, at first."

Darkness, and once again, for Ellen, that peculiar thrill. She was still next to Eddie, could see his lowered profile, dimly, at intervals, infer the motions of his hands. He was, she thought, somehow a little nervous, and this troubled her, made her more anxious that he should succeed. Then Mr. Brace would see! And she—she too would then have strength to do as she had planned, repeat *her* miracle before them all, play with the red-hot coals. Her breath caught chokingly.

The seconds passed. What was delaying Eddie? On the last occasion, she remembered, as soon as the lights were turned on, the flowers had been discovered, no longer in the vase, but shut up in her workbox in a far corner of the room. Then, in the sight of all, they had, as they were watching, disappeared. They were there, and then they were just not there. It was a double wonder.

But to-night the first part seemed to take much longer. That was Mr. Brace's fault for talking as he had and making the conditions adverse. Presently, however, he would be confounded as before, and—

Her thought halted abruptly, went on again next instant with distressed intentness. Uneasiness, now mounting to acute alarm, had for some seconds anticipated recognition of its cause. Then, when she understood, her heart turned over sickly. She felt faint. It was Eddie. Something was wrong. She heard the noise of shivered glass, an object falling to the floor, a muttered curse. Oh, *what was Eddie doing? What—*

## JOHN METCALFE

The light! Suddenly and like a blow, blinding, making them wince, exclaim. Janet, who had crept to the switch and turned it on, standing indignant, pointing at the broken vase. Her voice, trembling with scorn: "Faker! There, that'll show you all. The faker! Look at him!"

And Eddie—Eddie discovered, groping, searching apparently beneath the table for whatever he had dropped, emerging presently, his face white and dejected as if he were about to cry, blinking and stammering. . . . "There, then, just look at him! Look at that thread wound round his hand! I'm sorry to have had to do a thing like this . . ."

But it was not upon the abject spectacle of Eddie, however dismally engrossing, that their attention remained fixed for long. Something far worse and far more discomposing than the belated and well-merited exposure of a blundering charlatan was going forward in this room. It was at Ellen that they looked.

Miss Moody had risen from her chair, her mouth open, though for a time no sound emerged. Terror or pain or both seemed to have checked her speech. She held up her arms, swayed, tottering. At last her voice was heard, ending upon a shriek: "Fire . . . the fire . . . !"

To Janet only did her words appear to carry any meaning. "Quick, she's—she must have burnt herself somehow. . . ." She sprang across the room towards her sister, dragging the cloth off the table on her way and sending Eddie's paraphernalia crashing to the floor. "Run quick—the tablecloth's no good—too thin—blankets—in the next room—she's burnt herself!"

*Burnt!* Ellen, before her anguish had become too great, could realise that. Ellen alone—it might be Agatha as well if she were here—could for some tortured seconds understand. . . . The fire! That fire she had scorned two days ago now had its way with her, unchecked. Upon her face, her head, her arms and hands, wherever she had held the coals, the scars appeared. Her flesh was blackening. She could apprehend no more. Her mind faded, dissolved in an inordinate agony. She began to run, wildly, in



small circles, hither and thither, trying to cool herself, uttering shriek upon shriek.

“Blankets—fetch *blankets!*” Finally, perceiving that the rest were still too stunned and horror-struck to be of any help, Janet was forced to run for them herself into the bedroom, tear them from off the bed. But, though she made what speed of it she could, returning with a couple almost instantly, her efforts were in vain.

She was, she found, too late. The screams that filled the room a moment since had ceased.

# The Electric King

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LORD DUNSANY

This is a story Jorkens told me one day. It goes to prove that he does not talk always of himself, as some of the members of our club have chosen to assert; and, since there is no personal motive to be served by any inaccuracy, I see no reason for doubting it. And if this story of his be true, why not his other ones? That is the way I look at it, without any wish whatever to interfere with the judgment of others.

He had fallen asleep after a somewhat heavy meal, and all the other members but I had left: some had business to attend to, while others were irritated by Jorkens' snoring, though I couldn't see what harm his snores were doing; or what good their business did, if you come to that. And presently one of Jorkens' snores turned to a gurgle, which seemed for a moment to be going to choke him; and that woke him up; and, being all alone with him, I made the remark, "I suppose you have seen some pretty queer things in your time."

"And people," said Jorkens. And very soon he was well started, wonderfully refreshed by his sleep, and by whatever he may have had with his lunch. And this is the tale. He was in America, knocking about in New England, and chancing to be somewhat out of funds. And he had taken up reporting for a paper, and interviewing, whenever he could get a scrap of work to do, in order to get on to what he called a financial footing; which I expect meant money enough to get back to England third class. And one day they had sent him to see Makins, the millionaire, who had been having a good deal of publicity lately,



## THE ELECTRIC KING

and to get an interview from him. In case the name of Makins conveys little, he was better known as the Electric King; and his publicity had come from the interest that had been taken in the case to prove that he was capable of administering his own affairs. That he was so capable had been triumphantly proved by his lawyer, chiefly by full details of the organizing, the working, the tending, even the very oiling, of the giant dynamos that were watched and directed personally by Makins himself for fourteen hours out of every twenty-four, the whole year round, year after year. What the dynamos were used for was a point that was brushed aside with such consummate brilliance that unless my reader be thoroughly trained in the law he would never be able to appreciate it. These were the dynamos that Jorkens saw when he went to interview Makins.

Jorkens would never have had the job if it had been an easy one, and yet he got the man's whole story. There was something about him that Makins had liked, even if it was only that "he took his wine like a man," to use Makins' own words, and so he had got his story. Jorkens had congratulated him on the news with which the world was ringing, that he had just been proved capable of controlling his own affairs, and Makins had said, "Isn't it just marvellous?" And then he had been silent for a quarter of an hour, sitting, sometimes shaking his head, in a large carved chair, till he suddenly muttered, and soon his voice gained strength, and he told Jorkens this story.

"I had the idea of busting the whole electric light of America and then gathering it all up again into my own hands: one company to illuminate every city of the United States. We should have been a power, at the lowest computation, equal to the full moon. I had it clear in my head, and I could have done it—I can't give you the details: it isn't clear now: but it was in those days; clear to the last cent. You might have asked me any question about the minutest part of the scheme, and I could have answered at once in those days.

"I should have controlled all that light; think of it. As much

## LORD DUNSANY

as the full moon sheds on the North American continent. Then my leisure went. I suddenly lost my leisure. A slight attack, the doctor called it. But it wasn't an attack: I was perfectly well in body. And it certainly wasn't my mind: that was clearer than ever, too clear in fact; my thoughts were crystal-clear, but too many of them. I simply lost my leisure. It takes a good deal of work, a good deal of thought, for one man to control big business; and when I stopped to breathe at the summit of my career, on a pinnacle higher than I had ever dreamed of, my thoughts ran on. They would not stop, and so I lost my leisure. Well, I didn't mind at first: they all went into the business. But when I found that the most trivial thoughts began to run through my head, like a mob of dirty children in a great ballroom, thoughts too trivial and silly and irrelevant even to mention, and no keeping them out, why then I began to panic, and went to a doctor, and said to him, 'What about it?' And he said, 'Sea voyage.' And I sailed from New York for Bombay.

"Well, I found the sea voyage was not doing me any good, and I did some thinking then; I was always thinking; and I figured it out then that what I wanted was not a doctor, but one who dealt with the terrors of the soul. Yes, I don't exaggerate: I was pretty well frightened by then: I began to see that those thoughts were hunting my reason: noses down, tails up, ears flapping, that's what they were after, as surely as hounds a long way behind a fox. Well, there were one or two priests on board, of various denominations, and I talked to them a good deal, walking round the decks in the evening with one or other of them, and putting my case to him as soon as he began to listen. But they mostly talked to me about going to heaven, and I figured that their advice was too like my doctor's, who had sent me to Bombay; not that Bombay's like heaven, in the hot weather not at all. And besides, I knew their talk pretty well already; and my thoughts went racing on.

"And then I remembered that I had heard that there were a good many religions in India, some with idols and some without; it was all one to me; I was being hunted over a precipice and



## THE ELECTRIC KING

was anxious to clutch at anything. I mean any prejudice I may have had against idols seemed now merely absurd: you mayn't like brambles, but you'd grab them going over an edge and to such a drop as I saw. Yes, sir, my wits were tottering. And that thought went on hunting them.

"It had come down chiefly to one thought now. It was something about a rat that I had once thrown a stone at. That was the nearest one, the leading one of the pack: night and day, you know, and of course no sleep to speak of.

"I got to know a man on board who had been in India a good deal. I guessed it by his face and began to talk to him. And in a day or two I had put my whole case before him, as near as I dared, for I daren't speak of the rat in those days. Ebblit his name was, and he told me about the Ganges. Our acquaintance began in the Mediterranean; we used to play chess at first, and sit and talk when the game was over. But he never really spoke out, never told me all he felt, or half he knew, till we turned that corner where de Lesseps stands, with one bronze hand held out to the eastern gate of the world; and the corrupt city of Port Said drops astern, a cluster of white domes in the evening, the sort of thing an angel might dream on waking; just leaving it behind him, you know, as we were. And Ebblit soon after that began to talk of the East, as though it were really there, and there were nothing odd about it; while the West and its ways seemed to drop further and further away from him, till he seemed no longer intimidated by its prejudices and customs. And then he spoke of the beauty of that river. He did not seem to know whether the calm of its beauty moulded the thoughts of those people, soothing and lulling them to an undreamed content, or whether it was the thoughts of generations of people that had given the river that surpassing sanctity. But I began to see there was ease to be found on the Ganges; and rest, as I dared to hope, for my hunted wits. And I asked him what part of the river was best to go to; and he thought for a little while and answered, 'Benares.'

"I had a long way yet to go, and that rat with its wounded

## LORD DUNSANY

tail was terribly close. I forgot to tell you that its tail was broken. Gosh, I'm a tough man! I've known hundreds of men right through, their little minds clear as glass to me, and I don't know one of them, not one, that would have held out against that rat through the Red Sea.

"They had a large tank on board rigged up as a swimming bath, and I used to get some coolness there after sunset, floating on the water and looking up at the stars and thinking of the rat.

"And then I used to go and talk to Ebblit. Every bit of information I could get from him I used to collect like a stamp collector—the name of the best hotel, the best part of the river to sit at, the priests, the temples, the legends—everything I could get from him while we walked up and down in the heat. And one day I very nearly mentioned the rat to him. Not quite, but I think he saw it coming. After that I found it more difficult to get him to have a talk with me, especially when alone.

"I was practically all alone with the rat after that.

"And at last we reached Bombay.

"Of course there are things to see in India between Bombay and Benares, quite a lot in fact. The eighth wonder of the world is at Agra, and the earthly paradise in the old palace at Delhi, not to mention the marvels of history which are the equals of legend in other lands. There's a lot to look at beyond the pinnacles of the Western Ghats. But by now I could see nothing but the slow blood oozing from the battered bruise in the tail. So I hurried on to Benares.

"There was a man outside the Cow Temple who would help me, Ebblit had told me, at the right-hand side of the door. He was there three years ago, Ebblit had said, and would probably still be there. And I mustn't mind him being rather dirty, very dirty in fact. I would have laughed at the idea if I'd been able to laugh in those days. Dirty, indeed! What was dirt to that rat?

"I went to that temple in terror. What if the man had gone? Three years seemed a long time to me. But it wasn't long to him, just as Ebblit had said. He was there right enough, at the right-hand side of the door that leads to the Cow Temple; loin-cloth,



## THE ELECTRIC KING

bare skin, and dirt; sitting upon the ground with a bowl beside him. So I found an interpreter and went back to the dirty man and put my case to him at once, before I had even gone to my hotel. Of course I didn't tell him about the rat; perhaps I might have done so had he been cleaner; but I said that I was a business man much troubled by business worries, and that other thoughts intruded themselves on me too. He seemed to pay little attention, and when my interpreter and I had done, he merely replied, 'Speak openly.'

"You may guess that I didn't like being spoken to in such a way by a man like that, and I was silent a moment. And then in my utter despair I mentioned the rat. And the instant I mentioned it the whole thing poured out: I had never spoken of it before. Its eyes, its whiskers, its fur, I described it all to him, from its eager nose to the mangled bend in its tail.

"And he said to me, if the interpreter got it right, 'The River Ganges is beautiful beyond the conception of man, and beyond the capacity of any mind to estimate. In the contemplation of this beauty is complete fulfilment of all desire. No ambition transcends it. Nothing even hoped for can surpass it. It is the fitting occupation of any lifetime. Go, and sit by it until the picture of the river dwells in your innermost mind, as it does with me, more near than the hands and feet. Sit by it, if need be, all your days. The reward hereafter is infinite; and for the seekers, like yourself, for immediate gain, even for these it is adequate.'

"It's odd, but it seemed to me that the man was talking sense. The rat was still there, but a ray of faint hope had shone from beyond the sound of his voice. I felt like some wayfarer lost and terribly hunted, who suddenly hears in the darkness a music of bells, and beyond the bells at last some cottager's light. That was no mad fancy, but only came from the stress of weeks without sleep.

"Well, I went to the Ganges. Boys, it's a jewel! I went down to it about sunset, and it lay there like a vast piece of a semi-precious stone, one of those very pale beryls or aquamarines. I realised at once it was no use just looking at it; I wasn't a sight-

## LORD DUNSANY

seer now, but a fugitive from a terror greater than any of those that ever hunt the body: I would cheerfully have sat and played with a tiger, to get away from that rat.

“Suicide may be suggesting itself to you as an obvious remedy. But I wouldn’t do that, because I felt that the rat was after my reason, and I wanted to save it from him with all its power, not to throw it away. So I had gone to the Ganges, not to gaze at it, but to let it sink into my soul, to contemplate its beauty as I had been told, till it became more to me than my hands and feet, and nothing else should matter, not even the rat.

“It seemed the world’s end, that river; so many steps led down to it. It was not like tracks that run down to a ford and go onward the other side, or paths that lead to a ferry, to wait a while; these steps thronged down to the water’s edge and ceased, the end of the journeys of pilgrims living or dead. I sat down on one of the steps near a tiny temple and watched the day fading, and the more it faded the more easy I found it to take my first lesson in the lore that should save me from the rat. And the beauty of the river began sinking into me, as easily as if I’d been there for years and years. Pilgrims came down the steps by twos and threes; pigeons came to the little temple beside me, dropping down to their rest among the tiny domes, and the colour went out of things with the loss of the sun, all but the river, which seemed to keep a light of its own. Now for the first time I noticed the fires of death, flickering up from the burning ghats. Sometimes a ship with great sails stole down the river, with never a ripple upon that wondrous calm, so that it seemed that the ship was a ship of ghosts or the river something from dreamland, something far out among dreams, a long long way from waking. Now I saw vividly a slanting moon, young in the west like a horn, over the little temple. And, as the moon brightened and the fires of death grew stronger, the colour that had faded out of the sky with sunset began to return with the afterglow, coming back more gorgeous than it had been before, like a traveller returning to some rural home clad in the silks



## THE ELECTRIC KING

and splendours of wonderful lands. It increased and increased, till the luminous river seemed dark, beside the astonishing glow of it."

As Makins spoke of the Ganges he talked very fast, gazing straight in front of him over Jorkens' head, without a thought of his scurrying pencil. Jorkens was writing shorthand and even then scarcely kept up. It wasn't so much the beauty of the Ganges that was entrancing him, Jorkens thinks, as the first escape, of a kind, that he had ever had from the rat; though he hadn't really got away from it. As he put it himself, "Masses of twilight seemed to be descending rapidly, draping the holy city with all their glory: you know how pieces of evening, slabs of light, seem to fall between you and buildings at this enchanted hour, buildings on solid earth, and sky between you and them. It was like that with me and the rat. There was something at last, at last, between me and him. The beauty of the Ganges. It could not overcome him, the thing was too strong for that. But the rat was now on the far side of the river.

"A most intense beauty filled the sky with the deep colours of India, a hush hung heavily at the brink of the river, a hush as though the world had ceased its spinning to watch for the first star: the door of the little temple opened noiselessly, showing all dark within, and the hush deepened over all the river. And suddenly bells at the very water's edge sent up a melody clanging across the hush; wide windows opened in the dark far up above me, from which poured sudden music of instruments utterly strange to us; drums beat unseen from the little temple near; the rapidly darkening air throbbed to a strange rhythm, that boomed and resounded among the walls of Benares; that was their way of worship; they were giving praise to the river. You'll excuse me a moment, won't you?" And Makins rose and went to a little shutter, a sliding panel in the library where they were sitting, and moved the panel aside. And at once a great purr filled the room, the voice of a hundred dynamos. Jorkens had heard the murmur of them before, all the time that Makins was talking about the Ganges, but now the roar of their purring filled all the

## LORD DUNSANY

room, and he could see the rows of them, like a vast stable of elephants. What stupendous energies that iron multitude was unloosing Jorkens did not then know, only that a vast power was going invisibly forth. They were looking down on the hall of the dynamos from the height of one story, and men were going about amongst the dark rounded shapes, oiling machinery. "My dynamos are being fed," said Makins. Jorkens said nothing; the hugeness of the power so near to him, the humble service these monsters were giving to man, and the incompatibility between the organized might of science and the devoted worship of an Indian river seemed to have taken his breath away. And Makins continued:

"I stayed there for three days. The rat was now, as I said, on the far side of the river; but it went no further away. In the gloom of thought I could see its whiskers twitching whenever it sniffed, and I knew whom it was sniffing for. So I went back to the dirty man and told him all about it. And he said, 'The Ganges flows from a hill too high for our feet. And on that hill is a city of pure gold. Everything there is gold, pavement and houses: even the shops are gold. And all the people that dwell in it are Hindus.' When he spoke of the beauty of the river he had me beat; that was a thing he understood; but when it came to a definite fact of geography, that set me arguing. 'How did he know,' I asked, 'that the golden city was there?' 'I have seen it,' he said. 'I walked for months up the river, walking in my youth, great distances every day; and I came to the hill, and it was all white, and there was no city there. I was young and had not the faith. And I stayed there looking at it for seven days, fasting and sometimes praying to those to whom prayer is due. And at the end of the seventh day I thought I noticed a change. And the sun set, and there was no change. And all the hill grew dull. And I was faint with fasting. And all of a sudden the golden city came; street upon street of it straggling along the hill; and domes and walls and towers all twinkling and shining; a city of purest gold, as the Brahmins teach.'

" 'Should I see it?' I asked.



“ ‘Not yet,’ he said.

“ ‘When should I see it?’ I asked him.

“ ‘Stay for three months upon the bank in Benares,’ he told me. Well, it seemed a long time, but I did as the dirty man said. And the rat stayed all that time on the far side of the river, and I had some sleep at nights, yet things got no better than that; I could still see the country of madness too near to my borders, edges of my imagination almost touched it.

“One day at the very end of the three months, as I sat watching the pilgrims, it suddenly occurred to me that it was not my river; that I should never believe the story of the golden city, and its gods could never be my gods. I made up my mind suddenly. I never even told the dirty man. I suppose he is sitting there now by the door of the Cow Temple, with the cows and peacocks strolling about inside, and the worshippers tolling a bell whenever they pray, so that their god shall hear them. I left at once. I suppose I valued too lightly the rest I had had from the rat, or thought that the respite would last. The moment I left the Ganges he crossed the river, and was back again as close as ever he was. He might have driven me back to Benares, but I knew by now that the Ganges could never get rid of him: the holy river was only a palliation, and I had a hope of shaking him off altogether. You see, from the first I thought religion could do it. I am pretty shrewd as men go and make up my mind quickly, and from the very first I had spotted that that rat was one of the terrors of the soul. So that spiritual help was what I needed, if I could only find a religion that had a priest that was ready to fight the rat. And I had not given up hope. The greatest religions, I said, have always come out of deserts. And it must be so: for before a man can even look at the verities, let alone ponder and value them, he must clear off the dust of all the things that don't matter; like today's news, today's opinions, today's fashions; yesterday's customs, and tomorrow's fears. So I left the opalescent city of Benares, travelling in search of a desert. And the rat travelled with me.

“I took a train for Delhi to begin with. There I intended to

## LORD DUNSANY

inquire my way to a desert, and in the desert I hoped to find some holy man who might have found enough wisdom, out of the way of cities, to be able to solve the terrific problem I brought him. Well, I was sitting in my railway carriage towards evening, thinking of the rat, when all of a sudden, pale and clear on my right, I saw a range of mountains that I did not know was there.

“While we waited at the next station I asked the station-master about them, and he told me they were the Himalayas. The Himalayas! Imagine seeing a waterfall and asking its name, and being told that it was Niagara; or entering a church by chance, and finding it was Westminster Abbey. So I came to the Himalayas.

“The station-master told me the names of the peaks, pale mauve a long way off. I’ve always found you English very obliging. And then I asked him the name of a white one, all alone over the rest, and he answered as though it were not there at all, or at any rate need not be bothered about.

“ ‘Oh, that’s in Tibet,’ he said. Isn’t that like you? You’re nearly all like that. It was outside the British Empire, and so it didn’t count.”

Of course Jorkens said that that wasn’t so at all. That we thought rather more of a foreign country if anything than of our own, and would do anything rather than show we thought it was foreign. So a few moments passed over international courtesies, meaningless and polite, while the dynamos purred on faintly the other side of the shutter. And then Makins continued, “I hadn’t been looking at them for long when I said to myself, Mountains. Mountains, I said: they’re every bit as good as deserts; and I’ve heard strange tales of Tibet. On a mountain a man may do as much thinking as he could down on the sand, provided he goes high enough; all the silly little phrases that buzz round thought and obscure it wouldn’t get far up a mountain. I’ll go there, I said; and I decided at once; at the next stop from that I got out. And the rat hopped out with me.

“I hired a motor in course of time; you can do anything in time in the East; and we started straight for those mountains. I



## THE ELECTRIC KING

was getting no sleep now at all and I made the chauffeur do sixty. We startled the little tree-rats as we shot past. Wonderful little animals. How I wished it were one of them that was after my reason, instead of the foul brute that I knew. Or even a monkey. But I suppose a man can't choose what terror will hunt his soul. And looking at it reasonably, as one always should at anything, I suppose one curse is as bad as another; only I couldn't think so then.

"Well, we motored on towards the mountains in the afternoon, the afternoon of the day following my talk with the station-master, until what had been patches of blue laid upon lilac began to be great ravines rent in the slope of the mountain. Tibet by now no longer peered down on one, but was hidden by this huge wall, shutting it off from the world.

"We did a lot of mileage that day, till we came to a place where the chauffeur said the car could go no further. Not that I bothered about that, for I had had from him the rumour of a monastery fifty miles or so further on, the very thing I was looking for; and I would gladly have walked without food or rest, with that ahead of me and the rat behind.

"As it turned out I didn't have to walk, and as it turned out it was a lot more than fifty miles; but we got hold of a bullock-cart at a village, a thing they call a tonga: two bullocks drag it, and they can go anywhere. I don't say it was comfortable, but comfort had gone from me since the coming of the rat, and I found bodily discomfort rather pleasant than otherwise: I had come to that pass long ago. We were travelling in the bed of a great river, the man that was driving the oxen, and I, and of course the rat. Our wheels were going over white sand and boulders, everything perfectly dry, except for long narrow pools of shallow water, lying like shreds torn out from a mountain-oread's dress. The sambhur came out of the forest to gaze at us, not the least afraid of the bullock-cart. So thick was the forest all along the dry river that we seldom saw the mountains: when we did see them their imminence was tremendous; we were all among them now, as though we had strayed unannounced into

## LORD DUNSANY

the assembly of giants, ancient ones of the earth, deputed by Nature to deliberate on her plans. Now night began to fall, and the man halted his oxen and built a little circle of fires for the night, to keep away tigers. I kicked one of his little fires all golden into the darkness. 'Will that keep it off, do you think?' I blurted out at him. But he was thinking only of tigers.

"I regretted my violence almost immediately. 'You must forgive me,' I said, 'I can't sleep.' But he understood never a word, and it mattered not what I said to him.

"One tiger came very near; I heard his whispering footfall above the thought of the rat. The night passed, like all sleepless nights, in about a year; and dawn came suddenly. We made some tea, and the man ate some food he had brought, and we pushed on for Tibet. We went on all that day, our wheels climbing over the boulders and dropping down with a crash on the other side. But none of these jolts could shake the rat away.

"We made our little bivouac that night far up the slope in the cold with only one fire, above the fear of tigers. Not that I feared tigers. I had only one fear now, and my reason was tottering before it. Another sleepless night dragged by like a long chapter of history; and in the golden morning my driver pointed; and there, far enough off, but shining bright as the morning, there on a mountain was the monastery I sought. By noon we were as far as the bullocks could go; the rest of the way was sheer mountain. We had already changed bullocks twice, and done over sixty of the fifty miles that they had said it was to the monastery. I found that distances in India were often like that. But here was the monastery at last in sight. I was able to get more men to carry my kit from the tonga, and I pushed on ahead of them up the mountain. A tiny little path went winding away over what was otherwise nearly precipice: by the look of it they didn't often go from that monastery, whoever they were, and few seemed to go to them. A bell sounded as I climbed up to them, but there was hardly a welcome in the sound, as you might expect in this voice from the lonely mountain; it was too unearthly for that, too little concerned, so it seemed, with any



## THE ELECTRIC KING

cares we know. The way to the door seemed almost quite untrodden. By the door a bell-handle in bronze, shaped like a dragon, hung from a light chain. I went up and pulled the handle, and an astonishing din reverberated through the monastery. By some system of pulleys the chain that I pulled so easily must have swung a bell weighing little under a ton. And out came a wizened man in a monkish robe, and to him I tried to explain what I wanted without an interpreter, and without knowing a word of his language, or he knowing any of mine. But I think he must have guessed from some look of fear in my eyes, for he led me in; and presently the men came up with my baggage, and it was easier to explain more about myself by pointing to that. Had I come with less kit, and perhaps barefooted, they might have sent me on sooner. As it was, I sent one of the men who brought my baggage to go and get an interpreter, and it took him a week to find one. And all this time they housed me and gave me their queer food, and a small stone cell to sleep in. And when the interpreter came I had a talk with a younger monk, telling him all my case; and he told me to ask the interpreter to come back in a year; and that at the end of that time I should have prepared myself by suitable meditation to have speech with their Lama.

“That was an unthinkable year. The rat gnawing through my thoughts and working into my reason and they would not even let me ask for the cure. A year of horror. A year of the pit. I will not speak of it. They kept the rat from doing its worst, I will say that for them; they knew of exercises, exorcisms and spells, fastings and meditations that kept up the walls of the soul and kept the powers of night from actually taking the citadel; but I was beleaguered by terrors all that year, and they would not even let me ask for help. A ghastly, unspeakable year, and the rat so close that were it not for their bell, were it not for their bell, I don’t know what would have happened.

“It came to an end at last. At last they sent for me and said that their Lama would see me; and they had the interpreter all ready.

## LORD DUNSANY

"I was shown into his cell; a man in a yellow robe, with a flat-topped head; sitting calm at a table, and eyes like the scrutiny of the entire night, like the whole night solving a riddle, unravelling the mystery of courses of worlds that were older than ours. I spoke to him through my interpreter, but he did not speak to me. When I had spoken he merely pointed upwards, not to the sky but up the slope of the mountain, then he sat motionless with his gaze before him and his hands stretched out on the table. I saw that it was time to go, and I bowed to him and left the room, and soon afterwards left the monastery, and started, where he had pointed, up the mountain, where as I was told by one of the younger monks I should find another monastery before nightfall. Something in the reverence with which he spoke of it, something in the awe with which they watched me set forth, gave a fresh hope to my hard-hunted soul. It was in the early morning, and I climbed all day. No track whatever led up from the monastery I left: late in the afternoon I met a track arising out of nowhere and winding upwards. They didn't seem to call on each other much. I could not see the monastery to which I was going, but they had pointed out the direction, and I had no doubt that this insufficient track was the road of the people I looked for. The heat and fatigue were nothing to me, for without the protection, such as it was, that I had had from the monks of the lower monastery, the rat was hunting me sorely. And before the sun set I heard a bell above me; but so faint it sounded, lonely and lost on the mountain, and so very strange were its notes, so aloof from our joys or troubles, that it hardly seemed to ring from a habitation of men.

"I had brought my interpreter with me, a Hindu from near Naini Tal; that is to say he had left the lower monastery with me; but I had let him follow at leisure, not being driven, as I was, over the rocks by the pursuit of the rat. But besides the interpreter I brought nobody; nobody to carry my kit, and no kit to carry. I had an idea that it might be better to arrive like that this time. They don't set store by the things that we set store by.

"Over a rise the track I was following rambled, leading down



## THE ELECTRIC KING

to a little valley, and on the far side of the valley the upper monastery stood, with the little rocky valley to look out on, and the mountain going up like a sheer wall behind it. The sun set then, and a queer glow over everything added a mystery to the house I approached. By the door hung a bell-handle of silver, obviously shaped as a symbol, but a symbol of something of which I was utterly ignorant. I pulled the bell-handle, and a gentle note turned all the air of the monastery to music. And presently I heard monkish feet coming slowly down a passage, and the door opened. I had picked up some words of their language in the year at the other monastery, but not enough in which to speak of the terrors of the soul, the soul's affairs being so far more intricate than are those of the body. So I asked him for lodging, trusting to these people's hospitality, and told him that I had come from the lower monastery, and that my interpreter would soon arrive. When I spoke of the lower monastery, looking in his face, I might have been speaking of another world, so little it seemed to mean to him. I hoped from that. I hoped that they had some wisdom here of which they knew nothing below.

"To their hospitality I had not trusted in vain: he took me in at once; and as soon as the interpreter arrived I went with him to the cell of one of the monks and told over in all its terror my old story. Well, they certainly had spells: they used to chant them round my bed at evening, spells in no language I knew, not even the language that they usually spoke on this mountain and of which I had picked up scraps. They were only like reinforcements on tottering ramparts: they kept the rat away while I got some sleep; but I was nearing my end now, and palliatives like this could not postpone it much longer—the end was near, and the rat would get my reason. They occupied my day by reading runes to me that were all of them greater than curses, if you could get the right rune against the right curse. But I had a feeling that the rat was winning. And you'd think that his fur would be smooth and shiny, and the rat in fine condition. It was just the other way about. His fur was like dead fur; his lower jaw was drooping, his lips were shrunken, his sides were sinking in, and

## LORD DUNSANY

the wound in his tail was rawer and more revolting. Everything was shabby and mildewed about him except his eyes, and they were as keen and penetrating as ever.

"About a month went by. And then one day their Lama sent for me. I went in terror, for it seemed like my last chance. But all the monks smiled at me, telling me that all would be well. We were shown in, the interpreter and I, to the dim room in which the Lama was sitting, in a yellow robe, at a table of red lacquer. Nothing spoke but his eyes when we came in. And then I told my story. The interpreter knew the grim details of that tale of mine now, and told every terrible sentence after me rapidly. At the end, in the silence, the Lama spoke one word. I could not believe it. One word to my interpreter, and then that empty look upon his face that shows one that the interview is over.

"I looked at the interpreter, but he rose to go. And so I left in despair, having only got one word.

" 'What did he say?' I asked, as much out of curiosity as anything.

" 'Prayer,' said the interpreter.

"But prayer? What prayer? Did he think I hadn't prayed? As well advise a hunted fox to run. What did it mean, this one word that he spoke to me, I asked monk after monk? And they all of them said the same, they did not know; I must go further up the mountain.

" 'Another monastery?' I asked.

"Yes, one more, they said; a monastery at the top of the mountain. I calculated that that was another two thousand feet, and pretty steep; but I could not miss my way, it was right at the top of the peak. And so I started, though it was late in the afternoon, and soon night fell on my climbing. But I didn't mind that; it was better than lying awake on sleepless beds, with the sly rat in the dark, gnawing and gnawing its way through thought to my reason. I climbed all night, letting the interpreter come on when he would, and in the heat of the day I dropped at their door and rested. Here at least they could send me no higher. And after a while I got up and pulled a plain iron bell-



## THE ELECTRIC KING

handle, and a bell like a cow-bell clanged in the monastery, and a smiling Buddhist with a friendly face opened the door for me, and I staggered in. And for a while I said nothing. And then I said, 'Prayer, Prayer,' using the word that the Lama had said to me, and stumbled through some words of their language, trying to tell of my stress and the near approach of the rat; but I did not know enough of the language for that, yet he seemed to understand, and took me in and fed me. Then he took me to a cool room, where there was a bed, and gave me a pitcher of water, and there I slept for some hours. When I awoke the interpreter had arrived, and I wanted to tell my terrible story at once; but some of the monks quieted me, and I rested for some while longer. And when I woke again in the cool evening they seemed to know my story already; I suppose the interpreter had told them.

"And an older monk came in, and gave me a small square of paper with red writing upon it; and smiled, and said, 'The prayer.'

"I grasped it, and he went out of the room. But it was all in Tibetan. What was I to do?

"They did not leave me in perplexity long. The monk who had taken me in at the door came back with a tiny wheel, which he gave to me. Then he slipped the prayer into a catch in the wheel and showed me how to turn it. One did not pray orally, but turned the wheel.

"He went away and left me with my prayer, and I began to turn it. Oh, man, it was the right prayer!

"It was the right prayer at last. Imagine a man cold, weary, bitterly cold, taken instantly from the uphill road he is trudging to a soft chair by a fire in a warm room, instantly, without troubling to walk to it; or a man lost in a desert without water suddenly finding it is not true, suddenly finding himself safe at home; even so the rat faded.

"Well, I needn't tell you that I turned that wheel all day and far into the night. It was the first real rest I'd had for what seemed ages and ages. The only trouble was that the moment I tried to get to sleep, and stopped turning the wheel, the rat came

## LORD DUNSANY

back. Not that I minded that much at the time: it was such a relief to be able to keep that rat away that I turned the wheel till morning and troubled no more about sleep.

“Bright morning poured into my room, and I rose and looked from the window on a land more full of mountain-tops than any field is of ant heaps, always turning my wheel. A bell tolled, I did not know whether for breakfast or prayer, but it showed that the monks were about, so I went down and met them walking in one of the wide corridors. They greeted me and asked me if I had slept well, and then I explained my difficulty.

“A cheery laugh went up when I came to the difficulty about sleeping, as soon as I made myself clear. There was no difficulty in that, they said; and they sent for the interpreter, and when he had come they explained that they had little water-wheels all along a mountain-stream for several yards, that turned prayers night and day, and they said they would put one of these at my disposal. A kinder act I never knew; it meant rest by day, sleep by night; it meant at last a safe retreat from the rat.

“So two or three of them came down to the stream with me, and it was my turn to laugh when I saw their little wheels. Very crude compared to anything we can do over here. And one thing I didn't quite like about them was that they went slower than the one that you turned by hand. Too slow won't do, you know. It gives the rat time to slip in between thoughts. However, I said nothing of that at the time: I was too grateful to them to risk hurting their feelings. And they showed me the wheel I might use, and I slid my prayer into it. And though thoughts of the rat slipped in at the far end of the revolutions, just before the prayer got round to its starting-point, they were gone too soon to be able to keep me from sleep.

“A few days in that bright crystalline air, with regular sleep every night, and my prayer-wheel turning, and the company of these men, keen as pioneers, giving all their days to extend the limits of human thought, did wonders for me. I put on weight rapidly, and my face began to get some likeness again to the face that my friends would have recognized. And as my health



## THE ELECTRIC KING

came back my keenness came with it, my old capacity began to return, my grip of business and industry. And one day I went to one of these monks and said to him, 'See here. You want to let me move those prayer-wheels fifty yards lower down. It will give you a fall of another fifty feet. Or let me move them a hundred yards, and you'll have another twenty feet on to that, seventy feet in all, which will about double your power. And what's more, you've another stream, just as good, quite close, and a hundred men could dig a connecting trench in a day; or say ten days, working as the people you're likely to get will work; and that will double your power again. See?'

"I was speaking as much by signs as by the interpreter. The thing was such obvious sense there was nothing to argue about. But would they do it? They wouldn't even think about it. They wouldn't turn it over in their minds. Instead of thinking, they said it had always been like that. Instead of improving it, they said it was good enough for their fathers.

"I grant you the wisdom of the East: it had saved my reason. But when it comes to organisation, you have to go a long way West for it. God's own country every time. And back to it I returned very soon after that. It wasn't that I was ungrateful, I owed them more than ever I can repay, but I couldn't stand their lack of horse sense. You know, a man may have the wisdom of the ages, and yet be unable to put gasoline into his car if his chauffeur isn't with him. It was the same with these people. I did all I could to teach them, but in the end I had to leave them alone to go their own way. It wasn't that I was ungrateful, and it wasn't that I was not happy there, but those absurd little prayer-wheels were more than I could stand. Why, they had the water-power for ten times the speed they were doing, and I could have quadrupled it in a day or two. But I told you that. And, mind you, all the time the rat was gaining on the wheel. Very slowly, but gaining. And they stood helpless, and letting nobody help them, because it had been good enough for their fathers. So that, even if I had been able to stand their obsolete ways of doing things, the rat would have got me in the end,

## LORD DUNSANY

slipping in between thoughts a little bit quicker than the wheel, just before it completed its lazy revolution. So I came home to these dynamos. I took the little prayer-wheel with me and left them. I tried to get the monk that gave it me to come out here, to see what these dynamos could do. I wanted to pay his way across the world. But he wouldn't come, and so we parted for ever; some slight regret on his part, as I always like to think; and I in tears.

"In three days I was out of the mountains, and in a few more down to the coast, twiddling my prayer-wheel day and night all the way. You'll wonder how I slept all the way from Bombay to London. That was a very small piece of inventiveness for a man who has controlled the businesses I have controlled. I fixed my prayer to the electric fan in my state-room.

"And now you see these dynamos. All of them work to turn one wheel. And it's doing nine thousand revolutions a minute. My prayer is on that wheel.

"Not much chance for the rat. Not much chance for him to slip in a thought between one turn and the next. My prayer is down on him before he can dodge it.

"He may try to slip in sometimes. If I have been talking too much of him, as I have tonight, or remembering my time in India; then when my thoughts are all leaning his way he may make a grab at one of them before the wheel comes round, but he has to be mighty quick. And on just such a night as this, with all that talk about him, and calling to mind those days on the jewel-like Ganges and with the monks in the mountains, he might well be likely to try. But I take no chances. Smedgers," he called through the shutter. "Is Mr. Smedgers there?" And the man answered from the far end of the stable of those mighty dynamos.

"Accelerate," said Makins.

At once the drone of the dynamos rose to a wail, nearly drowning Makins' voice when he spoke again. "Get them up to twelve thousand," he shouted. Smedgers nodded. "For half an hour," Makins called down to him.



## THE ELECTRIC KING

"Right, sir," shouted Smedgers.

"That will stop him," said the Electric King.

This is the story as Jorkens took it down, word for word, in shorthand, and it would have been printed years ago but for some doubt there chanced to be raised at the time as to whether or not the interview was authentic.

# Curious Adventure of Mr. Bond

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NUGENT BARKER

Mr. Bond climbed from the wooded slopes of the valley into broad moonlight. His Inverness cape, throwing his portly figure into still greater prominence against the floor of tree-tops at his back, was torn and soiled by twigs and thorns and leaves, and he stooped with prim concern to brush off the bits and pieces. After this, he eased his knapsack on his shoulder; and now he blinked his eyes upon the country stretching out before him.

Far away, across the tufted surface of the tableland, there stood a house, with its column of smoke, lighted and still, on the verge of a forest.

A house—an *inn*—he felt it in his very bones! His hunger returned, and became a source of gratification to him. Toiling on, and pulling the brim of his hat over his eyes, he watched the ruby gleam grow bigger and brighter, and when at last he stood beneath the sign, he cried aloud, scarcely able to believe in his good fortune.

“The Rest of the Traveller,” he read; and there, too, ran the name of the landlord: “Crispin Sasserach”.

The stillness of the night discouraged him, and he was afraid to tap at the curtained window. And now, for the first time, the full weight of his weariness fell upon the traveller. Staring into the black mouth of the porch, he imagined himself to be at rest, in bed, sprawled out, abundantly sleeping, drugged into forgetfulness by a full stomach. He shut his eyes, and drooped a little under his Inverness cape; but when he looked again into the entrance, there stood Crispin Sasserach, holding a lamp



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

between their faces. Mr. Bond's was plump and heavy-jawed, with sagging cheeks, and eyes that scarcely reflected the lamp-light; the other face was smooth and large and oval, with small lips pressed into a smile.

"Come in, come in," the landlord whispered, "*do* come in. She is cooking a *lovely* broth to-night!"

He turned and chuckled, holding the lamp above his head.

Through the doorway of this lost, upland inn, Mr. Bond followed the monstrous back of his host. The passage widened and became a hall; and here, amongst the shadows that were gliding from their lurking-places as the lamp advanced, the landlord stopped, and tilted the flat of his hand in the air, as though enjoining his guest to listen. Then Mr. Bond disturbed the silence of the house with a sniff and a sigh. Not only could he smell the "lovely broth"—already, in this outer hall, he tasted it . . . a complex and subtle flavour, pungent, heavy as honey, light as a web in the air, nipping him in the stomach, bringing tears into his eyes.

Mr. Bond stared at Crispin Sasserach, at the shadows beyond, and back again to Crispin Sasserach. The man was standing there, with his huge, oval, hairless face upturned in the light of the lamp he carried; then, impulsively, as though reluctant to cut short such sweet anticipation, he plucked the traveller by the cape and led him to the cheerful living-room, and introduced him, with a flourish of the hand, to Myrtle Sasserach, the landlord's young and small and busy wife, who at that very moment was standing at a round table of great size, beneath the massive centre-beam of the ceiling, her black hair gleaming in the light of many candles, her plump hand dipping a ladle soundlessly into a bowl of steam.

On seeing the woman, whose long lashes were once more directed towards the bowl, Mr. Bond drew his chin primly into his neckcloth, and glanced from her to Crispin Sasserach, and finally he fixed his eyes on the revolutions of the ladle. In a moment, purpose fell upon the living-room, and with swift and nervous gestures the landlord seated his guest at the table,

## NUGENT BARKER

seized the ladle from his wife, plunged it into the bowl, and thrust the brimming plate into the hands of Myrtle, who began at once to walk towards the traveller, the steam of the broth rising into her grave eyes.

After a muttered grace, Mr. Bond pushed out his lips as though he were whispering "spoon".

"Oh, what a lovely broth!" he murmured, catching a drip in his handkerchief.

Crispin Sasserach grinned with delight. "I always say it's the best in the world." Whereupon, with a rush, he broke into peals of falsetto laughter, and blew a kiss towards his wife. A moment later, the two Sasserachs were leaving their guest to himself, bending over their own platefuls of broth, and discussing domestic affairs, as though they had no other person sitting at their table. For some time their voices were scarcely louder than the sound of the broth-eating; but when the traveller's plate was empty, then, in a flash, Crispin Sasserach became again a loud and attentive host. "Now then, sir—another helping?" he suggested, picking up the ladle, and beaming down into the bowl, while Myrtle left her chair and walked a second time towards the guest.

Mr. Bond said that he would, and pulled his chair a little closer to the table. Into his blood and bones, life had returned with twice its accustomed vigour; his very feet were as light as though he had soaked them in a bath of pine needles.

"There you are, sir! Myrtle's coming! Lord a'mighty, how I wish I was tasting it for the first time!" Then, spreading his elbows, the landlord crouched over his own steaming plateful, and chuckled again. "This broth is a wine in itself! It's a wine in itself, b'God! It staggers a man!" Flushed with excitement, his oval face looked larger than ever, and his auburn hair, whirled into bellicose corkscrews, seemed to burn brighter, as though someone had brought the bellows to it.

Stirred by the broth, Mr. Bond began to describe minutely his journey out of the valley. His voice grew as prosy, his words as involved, as though he were talking at home amongst his



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

own people. "Now, let me see—where was I?" he buzzed again and again. And later: "I was very glad to see your light, I can tell you!" he chuckled. Then Crispin jumped up from the table, his small mouth pouting with laughter.

The evening shifted to the fireside. Fresh logs cracked like pistol shots as Crispin Sasserach dropped them into the flames. The traveller could wish for nothing better than to sit here by the hearth, talking plangently to Crispin, and slyly watching Myrtle as she cleared away the supper things; though, indeed, among his own people, Mr. Bond was thought to hold women in low esteem. He found her downcast eyes modest and even pretty. One by one she blew the candles out; with each extinguishment she grew more ethereal, while reaping a fuller share of the pagan firelight. "Come and sit beside us now, and talk," thought Mr. Bond, and presently she came.

They made him very comfortable. He found a log fire burning in his bedroom, and a bowl of broth on the bedside table. "Oh, but they're overdoing it!" he cried aloud, petulantly; "they're crude, crude! They're nothing but school-children!"—and seizing the bowl, he emptied it onto the shaggy patch of garden beneath his window. The black wall of the forest seemed to stand within a few feet of his eyes. The room was filled with the mingled light of moon, fire, and candle.

Mr. Bond, eager at last for the dreamless rest, the abandoned sleep, of the traveller, turned and surveyed the room in which he was to spend the night. He saw with pleasure the four-poster bed, itself as large as a tiny room; the heavy oaken chairs and cupboards; the tall, twisting candlesticks, their candles burnt half-way, no doubt, by a previous guest; the ceiling, that he could touch with the flat of his hand. He touched it.

In the misty morning he could see no hint of the forest, and down the shallow staircase he found the hall thick with the odour of broth. The Sasserachs were seated already at the breakfast-table, like two children, eager to begin the day with their favourite food. Crispin Sasserach was lifting his spoon and pouting his lips, while Myrtle was stirring her ladle round the



tureen, her eyes downcast; and Mr. Bond sighed inaudibly as he saw again the woman's dark and lustrous hair. He noticed also the flawless condition of the Sasserach skin. There was not a blemish to be seen on their two faces, on their four hands. He attributed this perfection to the beneficial qualities of the broth, no less than to the upland air; and he began to discuss, in his plangent voice, the subject of health in general. In the middle of this discourse Crispin Sasserach remarked, excitedly, that he had a brother who kept an inn a day's journey along the edge of the forest.

"Oh," said Mr. Bond, pricking up his ears, "so you have a brother, have you?"

"Certainly," whispered the innkeeper. "It is most convenient."

"Most convenient for what?"

"Why, for the inns. His name's Martin. We share our guests. We help each other. The proper brotherly spirit, b'God!"

Mr. Bond stared angrily into his broth. "They share their guests . . . But what," he thought, "has that to do with me?" He said aloud: "Perhaps I'll meet him one day, Mr. Sasserach."

"To-day!" cried Crispin, whacking his spoon on to the table. "I'm taking you there to-day! But don't you worry," he added, seeing the look on the other's face, and flattering himself that he had read it aright; "you'll be coming back to us. Don't you worry! Day after to-morrow—day after that—one of these days! Ain't that right, Myr? Ain't that right?" he repeated, bouncing up and down in his chair like a big child.

"Quite right," answered Myrtle Sasserach to Mr. Bond, whose eyes were fixed upon her with heavy attention.

A moment later the innkeeper was out of his chair, making for the hall, calling back to Myrtle to have his boots ready. In the midst of this bustle, Mr. Bond bowed stiffly to Myrtle Sasserach, and found his way with dignity to the back garden, that now appeared wilder than he had supposed—a fenced-in plot of grass reaching above his knees and scattered with burdock, whose prickly heads clung to his clothes as he made for the gate in the



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

fence at the foot of this wilderness. He blinked his eyes, and walked on the rough turf that lay between him and the forest. By this time the sun was shining in an unclouded sky; a fine day was at hand; and Mr. Bond was sweeping his eye along the endless wall of the forest when he heard the innkeeper's voice calling to him in the stillness. "Mr. Bond! Mr. Bond!" Turning reluctantly, and stepping carefully through the garden in order to avoid the burrs of the burdock, the traveller found Crispin Sasserach on the point of departure, in a great bustle, with a strong horse harnessed to a two-wheeled cart, and his wife putting up her face to be kissed.

"Yes, I'll go with you," cried Mr. Bond, but the Sasserachs did not appear to hear him. He lingered for a moment in the porch, scowling at Myrtle's back, scowling at the large young horse that seemed to toss its head at him with almost human insolence, then he sighed, and, slinging his knapsack over his shoulder, sat himself beside the driver; the horse was uncommonly large, restless between the shafts, and in perfect fettle, and without a word from Crispin the animal began to plunge forward rapidly over the worn track.

. . . . .

For some time the two men drove in silence, on the second stage of Mr. Bond's adventure above the valley. The traveller sat up stiffly, inflating his lungs methodically, glaring through his small eyes, and forcing back his shoulders. Presently he began to talk about the mountain air, and received no answer. On his right hand the wall of the forest extended as far as his eyes could see, while on his left hand ran the brink of the valley, a mile away, broken here and there by rowan trees.

The monotony of the landscape, and the continued silence of the innkeeper, soon began to pall on Mr. Bond, who liked talking and was seldom at ease unless his eyes were busy picking out new things. Even the horse behaved with the soundless regularity of a machine; so that, besides the traveller, only the sky showed a struggle to make progress.

## NUGENT BARKER

Clouds came from nowhere, shaped and broke, and at midday the sun in full swing was riding between white puffs of cloud, glistening by fits and starts on the moist coat of the horse. The forest beneath, and the stretch of coarse grass running to the valley, were constantly shining and darkening, yet Crispin Sasserach never opened his mouth, even to whisper, though sometimes, between his teeth, he spat soundlessly over the edge of the cart. The landlord had brought with him a casserole of the broth; and during one of these sunny breaks he pulled up the horse, without a word, and poured the liquor into two pannikins, which he proceeded to heat patiently over a spirit-stove.

In the failing light of the afternoon, when the horse was still making his top speed, when Crispin Sasserach was buzzing fitfully between his teeth, and sleep was flirting with the traveller, a shape appeared obscurely on the track ahead, and with it came the growing jingle of bells. Mr. Bond sat up and stared. He had not expected to meet, in such a God-forsaken spot, another cart, or carriage. He saw at length, approaching him, a four-wheeled buggy, drawn by two sprightly horses in tandem. A thin-faced man in breeches and a bowler hat was driving it. The two drivers greeted each other solemnly, raised their whips, but never slackened speed.

"Well—who was that?" asked Mr. Bond, after a pause.

"My brother Martin's manservant."

"Where is he going?" asked Mr. Bond.

"To 'The Rest of the Traveller'. With news."

"Indeed? What news?" persisted Mr. Bond.

The landlord turned his head.

"News for my Myrtle," he whispered, winking at the traveller.

Mr. Bond shrugged his shoulders. "What is the use of talking to such a boor?" he thought, and fell once more into his doze; the harvest-moon climbed up again, whitening the earth; while now and then the landlord spat towards the forest, and never spoke another word until he came to Martin Sasserach's.

Then Crispin leapt to life.



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

"Out with you!" he cried. "Pst! Mr. Bond! Wake up! Get out at once! We've reached 'The Headless Man', sir!"

Mr. Bond, staggered by so much energy, flopped to the ground. His head felt as large as the moon. He heard the horse panting softly, and saw the breath from its nostrils flickering upwards in the cold air; while the white-faced Crispin Sasserach was leaping about under the moon, whistling between his teeth, and calling out enthusiastically: "Mar-tin! Mar-tin! Here he is!"

The sheer wall of forest echoed back the name. Indeed, the whole of the moonlight seemed to be filled with the name "Martin"; and Mr. Bond had a fierce desire to see this Martin Sasserach whose sign was hanging high above the traveller's head. After repeated calls from Crispin, the landlord of "The Headless Man" appeared, and Mr. Bond, expecting a very giant in physical stature, was shocked to see the small and bespectacled figure that had emerged from the house. Crispin Sasserach grew quick and calm in a moment. "Meet again," he whispered to Mr. Bond, shutting his eyes, and stretching his small mouth as though in ecstasy; then he gave the traveller a push towards the approaching Martin, and a moment later he was in his cart, and the horse was springing its way back to "The Rest of the Traveller".

Mr. Bond stood where he was, listening to the dying sound of the horse, and watching the landlord of "The Headless Man"; and presently he was staring at two grey flickering eyes behind the landlord's glasses.

"Anyone arriving at my inn from my brother's is trebly welcome. He is welcome not only for Crispin's own sake and mine, but also for the sake of our brother Stephen." The voice was as quiet and as clear as the moonlight, and the speaker began to return to his inn with scarcely a pause between speech and movement. Mr. Bond examined curiously the strongly-lighted hall that in shape and size was the very double of Crispin's. Oil-lamps, gracefully columned, gleamed almost as brightly from their fluted silver surfaces as from their opal-lighted heads; and there was Martin stooping up the very stairs,

it seemed, that Mr. Bond had walked at Crispin Sasserach's—a scanty man, this brother, throwing out monstrous shadows, turning once to peer back at his guest, and standing at last in a bright and airy bedroom, where, with courteous words from which his eyes, lost in thought and gently flickering, seemed to be far distant, he invited his guest to wash before dining.

Martin Sasserach fed Mr. Bond delicately on that evening of his arrival, presenting him with small, cold dishes of various kinds and always exquisitely cooked and garnished; and these, together with the almost crystalline cleanliness of the room and of the table, seemed appropriate to the chemist-like appearance of the host. A bottle of wine was opened for Mr. Bond, who, amongst his own people, was known to drink nothing headier than bottled cider. During dinner, the wine warmed up a brief moment of attention in Martin Sasserach. He peered with sudden interest at his guest. " 'The Headless Man?' There is, in fact, a story connected with that name. If you can call it a story." He smiled briefly, tapping his finger, and a moment later was examining an ivory piece, elaborately carved, that held the bill of fare. "Lovely! Lovely! Isn't it? . . . In fact, there are many stories," he ended, as though the number of stories excused him from wasting his thought over the recital of merely one. Soon after dinner he retired, alluding distantly to work from which he never liked to be away long.

Mr. Bond went to bed early that night, suffering from dyspepsia, and glowering at the absence of home comforts in his bright and efficient bedroom.

The birds awakened him to a brisk, autumnal morning. Breathing heavily, he told himself that he was always very fond of birds and trees and flowers; and soon he was walking sleepily in Martin Sasserach's garden. The trimness of the beds began to please him. He followed the right-angled paths with dignified obesity, his very bones were proud to be alive.

A green gate at the garden-foot attracted Mr. Bond's attention; but, knowing that it would lead him on to the wild grass beyond, and thence to the forest, whose motionless crest could be seen all



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

this while over the privet hedge, he chose to linger where he was, sniffing the clear scent of the flowers, and losing, with every breath and step, another whiff of Crispin's broth, to his intense delight.

Hunger drew him back into the house at last, and he began to pace the twilit rooms. Martin Sasserach, he saw, was very fond of ivory. He stooped and peered at the delicate things. Ivory objects of every description, perfectly carved: paper-knives, chess-men, salad-spoons; tiny busts and faces, often of grotesque appearance; and even delicate boxes, fretted from ivory.

The echo of his feet on the polished floors intensified the silence of "The Headless Man"; yet even this indoor hush was full of sound, when compared with the stillness of the scene beyond the uncurtained windows. The tufted grass was not yet lighted by the direct rays of the sun. The traveller stared towards the rowan trees that stood on the brink of the valley. Beyond them stretched a carpet of mist, raising the rest of the world to the height of the plateau; and Mr. Bond, recalling the house and town that he had left behind him, began to wonder whether he was glad or sorry that his adventures had brought him to this lost region. "Cold enough for my cape," he shivered, fetching it from the hall, and hurrying out of the inn; the desire had seized him to walk on the tufted grass, to foot it as far as the trees; and he had indeed gone some distance on his journey, wrapped in his thoughts and antique Inverness cape, when the note of a gong came up behind him, like a thread waving on the air.

"Hark at that," he whispered, staring hard at the ragged line of rowan trees on which his heart was set; then he shrugged his shoulders, and turned back to "The Headless Man", where his host was standing lost in thought at the breakfast-table that still held the crumbs of the night before.

"Ah, yes. Yes. It's you . . . You slept well?"

"Tolerably well," said Mr. Bond.

"We breakfast rather early here. It makes a longer day. Stennet will be back later. He's gone to my brother Crispin's."

"With news?" said Mr. Bond.

Martin Sasserach bowed courteously, though a trifle stiffly. He motioned his guest towards a chair at the table. Breakfast was cold and short and silent. Words were delicate things to rear in this crystalline atmosphere. Martin's skin sagged and was the colour of old ivory. Now and then he looked up at his guest, his grey eyes focused beyond mere externals; and it seemed as though they lodged themselves in Mr. Bond's very bones. On one of these occasions the traveller made great play with his appetite. "It's all this upland air," he asserted, thumping his chest.

The sun began to rise above the plateau. Again the landlord vanished, murmuring his excuses; silence flooded "The Headless Man", the garden purred in the full blaze of the sun that now stood higher than the forest, and the gravelled paths crunched slowly beneath Mr. Bond's feet. "News for Myrtle," he pondered, letting his thoughts stray back over his journey; and frequently he drifted through the house where all was still and spacious: dusty, museum-like rooms brimming with sunlight, while everywhere those ivory carvings caught his eye, possessing his sight as completely as the taste of Crispin's broth had lodged in his very lungs.

Lunch was yet another meal of cold food and silence, broken only by coffee that the landlord heated on a spirit stove at the end of the table, and by a question from the traveller, to which this thin-haired Martin, delicately flicking certain greyish dust off the front of his coat and sleeve, replied that he had been a collector of carvings for years past, and was continually adding to his collection. His voice drew out in length and seemed, in fact, to trail him from the sunlit dining-room, back to his everlasting work . . . and now the afternoon itself began to drag and presently to settle down in the sun as though the whole of time were dozing.

"Here's my indigestion back again," sighed Mr. Bond, mooning about. At home he would have rested in his bedroom, with its pink curtains and flowered wallpaper.



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

He crept into the garden and eyed the back of the house. Which of those windows in the trimly-creepered stone lit up the landlord and his work? He listened for the whirring of a lathe, the scraping of a knife . . . and wondered, startled, why he had expected to hear such things. He felt the forest behind his back, and turned, and saw it looming above the privet hedge. Impulsively, he started to cross the sun-swept grass beyond the gate; but within a few yards of the forest his courage failed him again: he could not face the wall of trees: and with a cry he fled into the house, and seized his Inverness.

His eyes looked far beyond the rowans on the skyline as he plodded over the tufted grass. Already he could see himself down there below, counties and counties away, on the valley level, in the house of his neighbours the Allcards, drinking their coffee or tea and telling them of his adventures and especially of *this* adventure. It was not often that a man of his age and secure position in the world went off alone, in search of joy or trouble. He scanned the distant line of rowan trees, and nodded, harking back: "As far as it has gone. I'll tell them this adventure, as far as it ever went." And he would say to them: "The things I might have seen, if I had stayed! Yes, Allcard, I was very glad to climb down into the valley that day, I can tell you! I don't mind admitting I was a bit frightened!"

The tippet of his cape caressed his shoulders, like the hand of a friend.

Mr. Bond was not yet half-way to the rowan trees when, looking back, he saw, against the darkness of the forest wall, a carriage rapidly approaching "The Headless Man". At once there flashed into his memory the eyes of the manservant Stennet who went between the Sasserach inns.

He knew that Stennet's eyes were on him now. The sound of the horses' feet was coming up to him like a soft ball bouncing over the grass. Mr. Bond shrugged his shoulders, and stroked his pendulous cheeks. Already he was on his way back to "The Headless Man", conscious that two flying horses could have overtaken him long before he had reached the rowans. "But

why," he thought, holding himself with dignity, "should I imagine that these people are expecting me to run away? And why that sudden panic in the garden? It's all that deathly quietness of the morning getting on my nerves."

The carriage had disappeared some time before he reached the inn, over whose tiled and weather-stained roof the redness of the evening was beginning to settle. And now the traveller was conscious of a welcome that seemed to run out and meet him at the very door. He found a log fire crackling in the dining-room, and Mr. Bond, holding his hands to the blaze, felt suddenly at ease, and weary. He had intended to assert himself—to shout for Martin Sasserach—to demand that he be escorted down at once from the plateau . . . but now he wished for nothing better than to stand in front of the fire, waiting for Stennet to bring him tea.

A man began to sing in the heart of the house. Stennet? The fellow's eyes and hawk-like nose were suddenly visible in the fire. The singing voice grew louder . . . died at length discreetly into silence and the tread of footsteps in the hall . . . and again the traveller was listening to the flames as they roared in the chimney.

"Let me take your coat, sir," Stennet said.

Then Mr. Bond whipped round, his cheeks shaking with anger.

Why did they want to force this hospitality upon him, making him feel like a prisoner? He glared at the large-checked riding-breeches, at the muscular shoulders, at the face that seemed to have grown the sharper through swift driving. He almost shouted: "Where's that bowler hat?"

Fear? . . . Perhaps . . . But if fear had clutched him for a moment, it had left him now. He knew that the voice had pleased him, a voice of deference breaking into the cold and irreverent silence of "The Headless Man". The cape was already off his shoulders, hanging on Stennet's bent and respectful arm. And—God be praised!—the voice was announcing that tea would be ready soon. Mr. Bond's spirits leapt with the word. He



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

and Stennet stood there, confidentially plotting. "China? Yes, sir. We have China," Stennet said.

"And buttered toast," said Mr. Bond, softly rubbing his chin. Some time after tea he was awakened from his doze by the hand of the manservant, who told him that a can of boiling water was waiting in his room.

Mr. Bond felt that dinner would be a rich meal that night, and it was. He blushed as the dishes were put before him. Hare soup! How did they know his favourite soup? Through entrée, remove, and roast, his hands, soft and pink from washing, were busier than they had been for days. The chicken was braised to a turn. Oh, what mushrooms *au gratin*! The partridge brought tears to his eyes. The Saxony pudding caused him to turn again to Martin, in Stennet's praise.

The landlord bowed with distant courtesy. "A game of chess?" he suggested, when dinner was over. "My last opponent was a man like yourself, a traveller making a tour of the inns. We started a game. He is gone from us now. Perhaps you will take his place?" smiled Martin Sasserach, his precise voice dropping and seeming to transmit its flow of action to the thin hand poised above the board. "My move," he whispered, playing at once; he had thought it out for a week. But although Mr. Bond tried to sink his thoughts into the problem so suddenly placed before him, he could not take them off his after-dinner dyspepsia, and with apologies and groans he scraped back his chair. "I'm sorry for that," smiled Martin, and his eyes flickered over the board. "I'm very sorry. Another night . . . undoubtedly . . . with your kind help . . . another night . . ."

The prospect of another day at "The Headless Man" was at once disturbing and pleasant to Mr. Bond as he went wheezing up to bed.

"Ah, Stennet! Do *you* ever suffer from dyspepsia?" he asked mournfully, seeing the man at the head of the staircase. Stennet snapped his fingers, and was off downstairs in a moment; and a minute later he was standing at the traveller's door, with a bowl of Crispin's famous broth. "Oh, that!" cried Mr. Bond,

staring down at the bowl. Then he remembered its fine effect on his indigestion at Crispin's; and when at last he pulled the sheets over his head, he fell asleep in comfort and did not wake until the morning.

At breakfast Martin Sasserach looked up from his plate.

"This afternoon," he murmured, "Stennet will be driving you to my brother Stephen's."

Mr. Bond opened his eyes. "Another inn? Another of you Sasserachs?"

"Crispin—Martin—Stephen. Just the three of us. A perfect number . . . if you come to think of it."

The traveller strode into the garden. Asters glowed in the lustreless light of the morning. By ten o'clock the sun was shining again, and by midday a summer heat lay on the plateau, penetrating even into Mr. Bond's room. The silence of the forest pulled him to the window, made him lift up his head and shut his eyes upon that monstrous mass of trees. Fear was trying to overpower him. He did not want to go to Stephen Sasserach's; but the hours were running past him quickly now, the stillness was gone from the inn.

At lunch, to which his host contributed a flow of gentle talk, the traveller felt rising within him an impatience to be off on the third stage of his journey, if such a stage must be. He jumped up from his chair without apology, and strode into the garden. The asters were now shining dimly in the strong sunlight. He opened the gate in the privet hedge, and walked on to the tufted grass that lay between it and the forest. As he did so, he heard the flap of a wing behind him and saw a pigeon flying from a window in the roof. The bird flew over his head and over the forest and out of sight; and for the first time he remembered seeing a pigeon taking a similar course when he was standing in the garden at Crispin's inn.

His thoughts were still following the pigeon over the boundless floor of tree-tops when he heard a voice calling to him in the silence. "Mr. Bond! Mr. Bond!" He walked at once to the gate and down the garden and into the house, put on his Inverness,



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

and hitched his knapsack on to his shoulder; and in a short while he was perched beside Stennet in the flying buggy, staring at the ears of the two horses, and remembering that Martin, at the last moment, instead of bidding his guest good-bye, had gone back to his work.

Though he never lost his fear of Stennet, Mr. Bond found Martin's man a good companion on a journey, always ready to speak when spoken to, and even able to arouse the traveller's curiosity, at times, in the monotonous landscape.

"See those rowans over there?" said Stennet, nodding to the left. "Those rowans belong to Mr. Martin. He owns them half-way to Mr. Crispin's place, and half-way on to Mr. Stephen's. And so it is with Mr. Crispin and Mr. Stephen in their turn."

"And what about the forest?"

"Same again," said Stennet, waving his hand towards the right. "It's round, you know. And they each own a third, like a huge slice of cake."

He clicked his tongue, and the horses pricked up their ears, though on either side of the dashboard the performance was no more than a formality, so swiftly was the buggy moving. "Very much quicker than Crispin's cart!" gasped the passenger, feeling the wind against his face; yet, when the evening of the autumn day was closing in, he looked about him with surprise.

He saw the moon rise up above the valley.

Later still, he asked for information regarding the names of the three inns, and Stennet laughed.

"The gentlemen are mighty proud of them, I can tell you! Romantic and a bit fearsome, that's what I call them. Poetical, too. They don't say 'The Traveller's Rest', but 'The Rest of the Traveller', mind you. That's poetical. I don't think it was Mr. Crispin's idea. I think it was Mr. Martin's—or Mrs. Crispin's. They're the clever ones. 'The Headless Man' is merely grim—a grim turn of mind Mr. Martin has—and it means, of course, no more than it says—a man without a head. And then again," continued Stennet, whistling to his horses, whose backs were

gleaming in the moonlight, "the inn you're going to now—"The Traveller's Head"—well, inns are called 'The King's Head' sometimes, aren't they, in the King's honour? Mr. Stephen goes one better than that. He dedicates his inn to the traveller himself." By this time a spark of light had become visible in the distance, and Mr. Bond fixed his eyes upon it. Once, for a moment, the spark went out, and he imagined that Stephen's head had passed in front of the living-room lamp. At this picture, anger seized him, and he wondered, amazed, why he was submitting so tamely to the commands—he could call them no less—of these oddly hospitable brothers. Fanned by his rage, the spark grew steadily bigger and brighter, until at last it had achieved the shape and size of a glowing window through which a man's face was grinning into the moonshine.

"Look here, what's all this?" cried Mr. Bond, sliding to his feet.

"'The Traveller's Head', sir," answered Stennet, pointing aloft.

They both stared up at the sign above their heads, then Mr. Bond scanned the sprawling mass of the inn, and scowled at its surroundings. The night was still and vibrant, without sound; the endless forest stood like a wall of blue-white dust; and the traveller was about to raise his voice in wrath against the brothers Sasserach, when a commotion burst from the porch of the inn, and on to the moon-drenched grass there strode a tall and ungainly figure, swinging its arms, with a pack of creatures flopping and tumbling at its heels. "Here is Mr. Stephen," Stennet whispered, watching the approach; the landlord of "The Traveller's Head" was smiling pleasantly, baring his intensely white teeth, and when he had reached the traveller he touched his forehead with a gesture that was at once respectful and overbearing.

"Mr. Bond, sir?" Mr. Bond muttered and bowed, and stared down at the landlord's children—large-headed, large-bellied, primitive creatures flopping round their father and pulling the skirts of the Inverness cape.

Father and children gathered round the traveller, who, lost



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

within this little crowd, soon found himself at the entrance of "The Traveller's Head", through which his new host urged him by the arm while two of the children pushed between them and ran ahead clumsily into the depths of the hall. The place was ill-lighted and ill-ventilated; and although Mr. Bond knew from experience exactly where the living-room would be situated, yet, after he had passed through its doorway, he found no further resemblance to those rooms in which he had spent two stages of a curious adventure. The oil-lamp, standing in the middle of the round centre table, was without a shade; a moth was plunging audibly at the blackened chimney, hurling swift shadows everywhere over the ceiling and figured wall-paper; while, with the return of the children, a harmonium had started fitfully to grunt and blow.

"Let me take your cloak, your cape, Mr. Bond, sir," the landlord said, and spread it with surprising care on one of the vast sofas that looked the larger because of their broken springs and the stuffing that protruded through their soiled covers: but at once the children seized upon the cape and would have torn it to pieces had not Mr. Bond snatched it from them—at this, they cowered away from the stranger, fixing him with their eyes.

Amidst this congestion of people and furniture, Stephen Sasserach smiled and moved continuously, a stooping giant whom none but Mr. Bond obeyed. Here was the type of man whose appearance the traveller likened to that of the old-time executioner, the axe-man of the Middle Ages—harsh, loyal, simple, excessively domesticated, with a bulging forehead and untidy eyebrows and arms muscled and ready for deeds. Stephen kept no order in his house. Noise was everywhere, yet little seemed to be done. The children called their father Steve, and put out their tongues at him. They themselves were unlovely things, and their inner natures seemed to ooze through their skins and form a surface from which the traveller recoiled. Three of their names were familiar to Mr. Bond. Here were Crispin and Martin and Stephen over again, while Dorcas and Lydia were sisters whose only virtue was their mutual devotion.

## NUGENT BARKER

The food at "The Traveller's Head" was homely and palatable, and Stephen the father cooked it and served it liberally on chipped plates. He sat in his soiled blue shirt, his knotted arms looking richly sunburnt against the blue. He was never inarticulate, and this surprised Mr. Bond. On the contrary, he spoke rapidly and almost as if to himself, in a low rugged voice that was always a pleasure to hear. At moments he dropped into silence, his eyes shut, his eyebrows lowered, and his bulging forehead grew still more shiny with thought; on such occasions, Dorcas and Lydia would steal to the harmonium, while, backed by a wail from the instrument, Crispin the Younger and Martin the Younger would jump from the sofas on to the floor.

Rousing himself at last, Stephen the Elder thumped his fist on the table, and turned in his chair to shout at the children: "Get along with you, devils! Get out your board, and *practise*, you little devils!" Whereupon the children erected a huge board, punctured with holes; and each child began to hurl wooden balls through the holes and into the pockets behind them with astonishing accuracy, except for Dorcas and Lydia. And presently their father reminded them: "The moon is shining!" At once the children scuttled out of the room, and Mr. Bond never saw them again.

The noise and the figured wall-paper, and the fat moth beating itself against the only source of light, had caused the traveller's head to grow heavy with sleep; and now it grew heavier still as he sat by the fire with Stephen after supper was over, listening to the talk of that strangely attractive man in the soiled blue shirt. "You fond of children, Mr. Bond, sir?" Mr. Bond nodded.

"Children and animals . . ." he murmured drowsily.

"One has to let them have their way," sighed Stephen Sasserach. The rugged voice came clearly and soothingly into Mr. Bond's ears, until at last it shot up, vigorously, and ordered the guest to bed. Mr. Bond pulled himself out of his chair, and smiled, and said good night, and the moth flew into his face. Where were the children, he wondered. Their voices could not be heard. Perhaps they had fallen asleep, suddenly, like animals.



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

But Mr. Bond found it difficult to imagine those eyes in bed, asleep.

Lying, some minutes later, in his own massive bed in this third of the Sasserach inns, with an extinguished candle on his bedside table, and gazing towards the open window from which he had drawn apart one of the heavy embroidered curtains, Mr. Bond fancied that he could hear faint cries of triumph, and sounds of knocking coming from the direction of the forest. Starting up into complete wakefulness, he went to the window, and stared at the forest beyond the tufted grass. The sounds, he fancied, putting his hand to his ear, were as those given forth by the children during their game—but louder, as though the game were bigger. Perhaps strange animals were uttering them. Whatever their origin, they were coming from that depth of trees whose stillness was deepened by the light of the moon.

“Oh, God!” thought Mr. Bond, “I’m sick to death of the moonlight!”—and with a sweep of the arm he closed the curtains, yet could not shut out the sounds of the forest, nor the sight of the frosted grass beneath the moon. Together, sound and sight filled him with foreboding, and his cheeks shook as he groped for the unlighted candle. He must fetch his Inverness from below, fetch it at once, and get away while there was time. He found his host still sitting by the lamp in the living-room. Stephen’s fist, lying on the table, was closed; he opened it, and out flew the moth.

“He thinks he has got away,” cried Stephen, looking up, and baring his teeth in a smile: “but he hasn’t! He never will!”

“I’ve come for my Inverness,” said Mr. Bond.

It was lying on one of the massive sofas. The fire was out, and the air chilly, and the depth of the room lay in darkness. An idea crossed the mind of Mr. Bond. He said, lifting up the cape: “I thought I’d like it on my bed.” And he shivered to show how cold he was. From one of the folds the moth flew out, and whirled round the room like a mad thing.

“That’s all right, Mr. Bond, sir. That’s all right.” The man had fallen into a mood of abstraction; his forehead shone in the rays of the lamp; and the traveller left the room, holding himself

with dignity in his gay dressing-gown, the Inverness hanging on his arm.

He was about to climb the staircase when a voice spoke softly in his ear, and wished him good night.

Stennet! What was the man doing here? Mr. Bond lifted his candle and gazed in astonishment at the back of Martin's manservant. The figure passed into the shadows, and the soft and deliberate ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall deepened the silence and fear of the moments that followed.

Mr. Bond ran to his room, locked himself in, and began to dress. His dyspepsia had seized him again. If only he were back at Crispin's! He parted the curtains, and peeped at the night. The shadow of the inn lay on the yard and the tufted grass beyond, and one of the chimneys, immensely distorted, extended as far as the forest. The forest-wall itself was solid with moonlight; from behind it there came no longer the sounds of the knocking, and the silence set Mr. Bond trembling again.

"I shall escape at dawn," he whispered, "when the moon's gone down."

Feeling no longer sleepy, he took from his knapsack a volume of *Mungo Park*, and, fully dressed, settled himself in an easy chair, with the curtains drawn again across the window, and the candle burning close beside him. At intervals he looked up from his book, frowning, running his eye over the group of three pagodas, in pale red, endlessly repeated on the wallpaper. The restful picture made him drowsy, and presently he slept and snored and the candle burned on.

At midnight he was awakened by crashing blows on his door; the very candle seemed to be jumping with fear, and Mr. Bond sprang up in alarm.

"Yes? Who's that?" he called out feebly.

"What in the name of God is *that*?" he whispered, as the blows grew louder.

"What are they up to now?" he asked aloud, with rising terror.

A splinter flew into the room, and he knew in a flash that the end of his journey had come. Was it Stephen or Stennet, Stephen



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

or Stennet behind the door? The candle flickered as he blundered to and fro. He had no time to think, no time to act. He stood and watched the corner of the axe-blade working in the crack in the panel. "Save me, save me," he whispered, wringing his hands. They fluttered towards his Inverness, and struggled to push themselves into the obstinate sleeves. "Oh, come on, come on," he whimpered, jerking his arms about, anger rising with terror. The whole room shuddered beneath the axe. He plunged at the candle and blew it out. In the darkness a ray of light shot through a crack in the door, and fell on the window curtain.

Mr. Bond remembered the creeper clinging beneath his window and as soon as possible he was floundering, scrambling, slipping down to the house-shadowed garden below. Puffing out his cheeks, he hurried onward, while the thuds of the axe grew fainter in his ears. Brickbats lay in his path, a zinc tub wrenched at his cape and ripped it loudly, an iron hoop caught in his foot and he tottered forward with outstretched hands. And now, still running in the far-flung shadow of the house, he was on the tufted grass, whimpering a little, struggling against desire to look back over his shoulder, making for the forest that lay in the full beams of the moonlight. He tried to think, and could think of nothing but the size and safety of the shadow on which he was running. He reached the roof of the inn at last: plunged aside from his course of flight: and now he was running up the monstrous shadow of the chimney, thinking of nothing at all because the forest stood so near. Blindingly, a moon-filled avenue stretched before him: the chimney entered the chasm, and stopped: and it was as though Mr. Bond were a puff of smoke blowing into the forest depths. His shadow, swinging its monstrously distorted garments, led him to an open space at the end of the avenue. The thick-set trees encircled it with silence deeper than any Mr. Bond had known. Here, in this glade, hung silence within a silence. Yet, halting abruptly, and pressing the flat of his hands to his ribs in the pain of his sudden burst of breathing, Mr. Bond had no ears for the silence, nor eyes for anything beyond the scene that faced him in the centre of the forest glade: a

group of upright posts, or stakes, set in a concave semicircle, throwing long shadows, and bearing on each summit a human skull. " 'The Traveller's Head', 'The Headless Man'," he whispered, stricken with terror, whipping his back on the skulls; and there was Stephen Sasserach in silhouette, leaping up the avenue, brandishing his axe as though he were a demented wood-cutter coming to cut down trees.

The traveller's mind continued to run swiftly through the names of the three inns. " 'The Traveller's Head'," he thought, " 'The Headless Man', 'The Rest of the Traveller'." He remembered the carrier pigeons that had flown ahead of him from inn to inn; he remembered the dust on the front of Martin's coat. . .

He was staring at the figure in the soiled blue shirt. It had halted now, as still as a tree, on the verge of the moon-filled glade: but the whirling thoughts of Mr. Bond were on the verge of light more blinding than this; they stopped, appalled: and the traveller fled beyond the skulls, fruitlessly searching for covert in the farthest wall of trees.

Then Stephen sprang in his wake, flinging up a cry that went knocking against the tree-trunks.

The echoes were echoed by Mr. Bond, who, whipping round to face his enemy, was wriggling and jerking in his Inverness cape, slipping it off at last, and swinging it in his hand, for his blood was up. And now he was deep in mortal combat, wielding his Inverness as the gladiators used to wield their nets in the old arenas. Time and again the axe and the cape engaged each other; the one warding and hindering; the other catching and ripping, clumsily enough, as though in sport. Around the skulls the two men fought and panted, now in darkness, now in the full light pouring down the avenue. Their moon-cast shadows fought another fight together, wilder still than theirs. Then Stephen cried: "Enough of this!" and bared his teeth for the first time since the strife had started.

"B-but you're my friend!" bleated Mr. Bond; and he stared at the shining thread of the axe.

"The best you ever had, sir, Mr. Bond, sir!" answered Stephen



## CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF MR. BOND

Sasserach; and, stepping back, the landlord of "The Traveller's Head" cut off the traveller's head.

The thump of the head on the sticks and leaves and grass of the forest glade was the first sound in the new and peaceful life of Mr. Bond, and he did not hear it; but to the brothers Sasserach it was a promise of life itself, a signal that all was ready now for them to apply their respective talents busily and happily in the immediate future.

Stephen took the head of Mr. Bond, and with gentle though rather clumsy fingers pared it to a skull, grinning back at it with simple satisfaction when the deed was over, and after that he set it up as a fine mark for his brood of primitives, the game's endeavour being to see who could throw the ball into the eye-sockets; and to his brother Martin, landlord of "The Headless Man", he sent the headless man, under the care of Stennet: and Martin, on a soft, autumnal day, reduced the headless body to a skeleton, with all its troubles gone, and through the days and nights he sat at work, with swift precision in his fingers, carving and turning, powdering his coat with dust, creating his figures and trinkets, his paper-knives and salad-spoons and fretted boxes and rare chess-men; and to his brother Crispin, landlord of "The Rest of the Traveller", Martin sent the rest of the traveller, the soft and yielding parts, the scraps, the odds and ends, the miscellaneous pieces, all the internal lumber that had gone to fill the skin of the man from the Midlands and to help to render him in middle years a prey to dyspepsia. Crispin received the parcel with a pursing of his small mouth, and a call to Myrtle in his clear falsetto: "Stennet's here!"

She answered from the kitchen. "Thank you, Cris!" Her hands were soft and swollen as she scoured the tureen. The back of the inn was full of reflected sunlight, and her dark hair shone.

"It's too late in the season now," she said, when tea-time came. "I don't suppose we'll have another one before the spring."

Yet she was wrong. That very evening, when the moon had

NUGENT BARKER

risen from beyond the valley, Myrtle murmured: "There he comes," and continued to stir her ladle in the bowl.

Her husband strolled into the hall, and wound the clock.

He took the lamp from its bracket on the wall.

He went to the door, and flung it open to the moonlight,; holding the lamp above his head.

"Come in, come in," he said, to the stranger standing there "she is cooking a *lovely* broth to-night!"



# The Dabblers

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W. F. HARVEY

It was a wet July evening. The three friends sat around the peat fire in Harborough's den, pleasantly weary after their long tramp across the moors. Scott, the ironmaster, had been declaiming against modern education. His partner's son had recently entered the business with everything to learn, and the business couldn't afford to teach him. "I suppose," he said, "that from preparatory school to university, Wilkins must have spent the best part of three thousand pounds on filling a suit of plus-fours with brawn. It's too much. My boy is going to Steelborough grammar school. Then when he's sixteen I shall send him to Germany so that he can learn from our competitors. Then he'll put in a year in the office; afterwards, if he shows any ability, he can go up to Oxford. Of course he'll be rusty and out of his stride, but he can mug up his Latin in the evenings as my shop stewards do with their industrial history and economics."

"Things aren't as bad as you make out," said Freeman, the architect. "The trouble I find with schools is in choosing the right one where so many are excellent. I've entered my boy for one of those old country grammar schools that have been completely remodelled. Wells showed in *The Undying Fire* what an enlightened headmaster can do when he is given a free hand and isn't buried alive in mortar and tradition."

"You'll probably find," said Scott, "that it's mostly eye-wash; no discipline, and a lot of talk about self-expression and education for service."

"There you're wrong. I should say the discipline is too severe if anything. I heard only the other day from my young nephew that two boys had been expelled for a raid on a hen-roost or some such escapade; but I suppose there was more to it than met the eye. What are you smiling about, Harborough?"

"It was something you said about headmasters and tradition. I was thinking about tradition and boys. Rum, secretive little beggars. It seems to me quite possible that there is a wealth of hidden lore passed on from one generation of schoolboys to another that it might be well worth while for a psychologist or an anthropologist to investigate. I remember at my first school writing some lines of doggerel in my books. They were really an imprecation against any one who should steal them. I've seen practically the same words in old monkish manuscripts; they go back to the time when books were of value. But it was on the fly-leaves of Abbott's *Via Latina* and Lock's *Arithmetic* that I wrote them. Nobody would want to steal those books. Why should boys start to spin tops at a certain season of the year? The date is not fixed by shopkeepers, parents are not consulted, and though saints have been flogged to death I have found no connection between top whipping and the church calendar. The matter is decided for them by an unbroken tradition, handed down, not from father to son, but from boy to boy. Nursery rhymes are not perhaps a case in point, though they are stuffed with odd bits of folklore. I remember being taught a game that was played with knotted handkerchiefs manipulated by the fingers to the accompaniment of a rhyme which began: 'Father Confessor, I've come to confess.' My instructor, aged eight, was the son of a High Church vicar. I don't know what would have happened if old Tomlinson had heard the last verse:

'Father Confessor, what shall I do?'  
 'Go to Rome and kiss the Pope's toe.'  
 'Father Confessor, I'd rather kiss you.'  
 'Well, child, do.' "



## THE DABBLERS

"What was the origin of that little piece of doggerel?" asked Freeman. "It's new to me."

"I don't know," Harborough replied. "I've never seen it in print. But behind the noddings of the knotted handkerchiefs and our childish giggles lurked something sinister. I seem to see the cloaked figure, cat-like and gliding, of one of those emissaries of the Church of Rome that creep into the pages of George Borrow—hatred and fear masked in ribaldry. I could give you other examples, the holly and ivy carols for instance, which used to be sung by boys and girls to the accompaniment of a dance, and which, according to some people, embody a crude form of nature worship."

"And the point of all this is what?" asked Freeman.

"That there is a body of tradition, ignored by the ordinary adult, handed down by one generation of children to another. If you want a really good example—a really bad example I should say—I'll tell you the story of the Dabblers." He waited until Freeman and Scott had filled their pipes and then began.

"When I came down from Oxford and before I was called to the Bar, I put in three miserable years at school teaching."

Scott laughed.

"I don't envy the poor kids you cross-examined," he said.

"As a matter of fact, I was more afraid of them than they of me. I got a job as usher at one of Freeman's old grammar schools, only it had not been remodelled and the headmaster was a completely incompetent cleric. It was in the eastern counties. The town was dead-alive. The only thing that seemed to warm the hearts of the people there was a dull smouldering fire of gossip, and they all took turns in fanning the flame. But I mustn't get away from the school. The buildings were old; the chapel had once been the choir of a monastic church. There was a fine tithe barn, and a few old stones and bases of pillars in the headmaster's garden, but nothing more to show where monks had lived for centuries except a dried-up fish pond.

"Late in June at the end of my first year, I was crossing the playground at night on my way to my lodgings in the High

Street. It was after twelve. There wasn't a breath of air, and the playing fields were covered with a thick mist from the river. There was something rather weird about the whole scene; it was all so still and silent. The night smelt stuffy; and then suddenly I heard the sound of singing. I don't know where the voices came from nor how many voices there were, and not being musical I can't give you any idea of the tune. It was very ragged with gaps in it, and there was something about it which I can only describe as disturbing. Anyhow I had no desire to investigate. I stood still for two or three minutes listening and then let myself out by the lodge gate into the deserted High Street. My bedroom above the tobacconist's looked out on to a lane that led down to the river. Through the open window I could still hear, very faintly, the singing. Then a dog began to howl, and when after a quarter of an hour it stopped, the June night was again still. Next morning in the masters' common room I asked if any one could account for the singing.

" 'It's the Dabblers,' said old Moneypenny, the science master, 'they usually appear about now.'

"Of course I asked who the Dabblers were.

" 'The Dabblers,' said Moneypenny, 'are carol singers born out of their due time. They are certain lads of the village who, for reasons of their own, desire to remain anonymous; probably choir-boys with a grievance, who wish to pose as ghosts. And for goodness' sake let sleeping dogs lie. We've thrashed out the Dabbler controversy so often that I'm heartily sick of it.'

"He was a cross-grained customer and I took him at his word. But later on in the week I got hold of one of the junior masters and asked him what it all meant. It seemed an established fact that the singing did occur at this particular time of the year. It was a sore point with Moneypenny, because on one occasion when somebody had suggested that it might be boys from the schoolhouse skylarking he had completely lost his temper.

" 'All the same,' said Atkinson, 'it might just as well be our boys as any others. If you are game next year we'll try to get to the bottom of it.'



## THE DABBLERS

"I agreed and there the matter stood. As a matter of fact when the anniversary came round I had forgotten all about the thing. I had been taking the lower school in prep. The boys had been unusually restless—we were less than a month from the end of term—and it was with a sigh of relief that I turned into Atkinson's study soon after eight to borrow an umbrella, for it was raining hard.

" 'By the by,' he said, 'to-night's the night the Dabblers are due to appear. What about it?'

"I told him that if he imagined that I was going to spend the hours between then and midnight in patrolling the school precincts in the rain, he was greatly mistaken.

" 'That's not my idea at all,' he said. 'We won't set foot out of doors. I'll light the fire; I can manage a mixed grill of sorts on the gas ring and there are a couple of bottles of beer in the cupboard. If we hear the Dabblers we'll quietly go the round of the dormitories and see if any one is missing. If they are, we can await their return.'

"The long and short of it was that I fell in with his proposal. I had a lot of essays to correct on the Peasants' Revolt—fancy kids of thirteen and fourteen being expected to write essays on anything—and I could go through them just as well by Atkinson's fire as in my own cheerless little sitting-room.

"It's wonderful how welcome a fire can be in a sodden June. We forgot our lost summer as we sat beside it smoking, warming our memories in the glow from the embers.

" 'Well,' said Atkinson at last, 'it's close on twelve. If the Dabblers are going to start, they are due about now.' He got up from his chair and drew aside the curtains.

" 'Listen!' he said. Across the playground, from the direction of the playing-fields, came the sound of singing. The music—if it could be called such—lacked melody and rhythm and was broken by pauses; it was veiled, too, by the drip, drip of the rain and the splashing of water from the gutter spouts. For one moment I thought I saw lights moving, but my eyes must have been deceived by reflections on the window pane.

“ ‘We’ll see if any of our birds have flown,’ said Atkinson. He picked up an electric torch and we went the rounds of the dormitories. Everything was as it should be. The beds were all occupied, the boys all seemed to be asleep. It was a quarter-past twelve by the time we got back to Atkinson’s room. The music had ceased; I borrowed a mackintosh and ran home through the rain.

“That was the last time I heard the Dabblers, but I was to hear of them again. Act II was staged up at Scapa. I’d been transferred to a hospital ship, with a dislocated shoulder for X-ray, and as luck would have it the right-hand cot to mine was occupied by a lieutenant, R.N.V.R., a fellow called Holster, who had been at old Edmed’s school a year or two before my time. From him I learned a little more about the Dabblers. It seemed that they were boys who for some reason or other kept up a school tradition. Holster thought that they got out of the house by means of the big wistaria outside B dormitory, after leaving carefully constructed dummies in their beds. On the night in June when the Dabblers were due to appear it was considered bad form to stay awake too long and very unhealthy to ask too many questions, so that the identity of the Dabblers remained a mystery. To the big and burly Holster there was nothing really mysterious about the thing; it was a schoolboys’ lark and nothing more. An unsatisfactory act, you will agree, and one which fails to carry the story forward. But with the third act the drama begins to move. You see, I had the good luck to meet one of the Dabblers in the flesh.

“Burlingham was badly shell-shocked in the war; a psychoanalyst took him in hand and he made a seemingly miraculous recovery. Then two years ago he had a partial relapse, and when I met him at Lady Byfleet’s he was going up to town three times a week for special treatment from some unqualified West End practitioner, who seemed to be getting at the root of the trouble. There was something extraordinarily likeable about the man. He had a whimsical sense of humour that must have been his salvation, and with it was combined a capacity for intense indig-



## THE DABBLERS

nation that one doesn't often meet with these days. We had a number of interesting talks together (part of his régime consisted of long cross-country walks, and he was glad enough of a companion) but the one I naturally remember was when in a tirade against English educational methods he mentioned Dr. Edmed's name—'the head of a beastly little grammar school where I spent five of the most miserable years of my life.' "

" 'Three more than I did,' I replied.

" 'Good God!' he said, 'fancy you being a product of that place!'

" 'I was one of the producers,' I answered. 'I'm not proud of the fact; I usually keep it dark.'

" 'There was a lot too much kept dark about that place,' said Burlingham. It was the second time he had used the words. As he uttered them, "that place" sounded almost the equivalent of an unnameable hell. We talked for a time about the school, of Edmed's pomposity, of old Jacobson the porter—a man whose patient good humour shone alike on the just and on the unjust—of the rat hunts in the tithe barn on the last afternoons of term.

" 'And now,' I said at last, 'tell me about the Dabblers.'

"He turned round on me like a flash and burst out laughing, a high-pitched, nervous laugh that, remembering his condition, made me sorry I had introduced the subject.

" 'How damnably funny!' he said. 'The man I go to in town asked me the same question only a fortnight ago. I broke an oath in telling him, but I don't see why you shouldn't know as well. Not that there is anything to know; it's all a queer boyish nightmare without rhyme or reason. You see I was one of the Dabblers myself.'

"It was a curious disjointed story that I got out of Burlingham. The Dabblers were a little society of five, sworn on solemn oath to secrecy. On a certain night in June, after warning had been given by their leader, they climbed out of the dormitories and met by the elm-tree in old Edmed's garden. A raid was made on the doctor's poultry run, and, having secured a fowl, they retired to the tithe barn, cut its throat, plucked and cleaned it, and then

W. F. HARVEY

roasted it over a fire in a brazier while the rats looked on. The leader of the Dabblers produced sticks of incense; he lit his own from the fire, the others kindling theirs from his. Then all moved in slow procession to the summer-house in the corner of the doctor's garden, singing as they went. There was no sense in the words they sang. They weren't English and they weren't Latin. Burlingham described them as reminding him of the refrain in the old nursery rhyme:

There were three brothers over the sea,  
*Peri meri dixi domine.*  
They sent three presents unto me,  
*Petrum partrum paradisi tempore*  
*Peri meri dixi domine.*

" 'And that was all?' I said to him.

" 'Yes,' he replied, 'that was all there was to it; but——'

"I expected the but.

" 'We were all of us frightened, horribly frightened. It was quite different from the ordinary schoolboy escapade. And yet there was fascination, too, in the fear. It was rather like,' and here he laughed, 'dragging a deep pool for the body of someone who had been drowned. You didn't know who it was, and you wondered what would turn up.'

"I asked him a lot of questions but he hadn't anything very definite to tell us. The Dabblers were boys in the lower and middle forms and with the exception of the leader their membership of the fraternity was limited to two years. Quite a number of the boys, according to Burlingham, must have been Dabblers, but they never talked about it and no one, as far as he knew, had broken his oath. The leader in his time was called Tancred, the most unpopular boy in the school, despite the fact that he was their best athlete. He was expelled following an incident that took place in chapel. Burlingham didn't know what it was; he was away in the sick-room at the time, and the accounts, I gather, varied considerably."



## THE DABBLERS

Harborough broke off to fill his pipe.

"Act IV will follow immediately," he said.

"All this is very interesting," observed Scott, "but I'm afraid that if it's your object to curdle our blood you haven't quite succeeded. And if you hope to spring a surprise on us in Act IV we must disillusion you." Freeman nodded assent.

" 'Scott who Edgar Wallace read,' " he began. "We're familiar nowadays with the whole bag of tricks. Black Mass is a certain winner; I put my money on him. Go on, Harborough."

"You don't give a fellow half a chance, but I suppose you're right. Act IV takes place in the study of the Rev. Montague Cuttler, vicar of St. Mary Parbeloe, a former senior mathematics master, but before Edmed's time—a dear old boy, blind as a bat, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. He knew nothing about the Dabblers. He wouldn't. But he knew a very great deal about the past history of the school, when it wasn't a school but a monastery. He used to do a little quiet excavating in the vacations and had discovered what he believed to be the stone that marked the tomb of Abbot Polegate. The man, it appeared, had a bad reputation for dabbling in forbidden mysteries."

"Hence the name Dabblers, I suppose," said Scott.

"I'm not so sure," Harborough answered. "I think that more probably it's derived from *diabolos*. But, anyhow, from old Cuttler I gathered that the abbot's stone was where Edmed had placed his summer-house. Now doesn't it all illustrate my theory beautifully? I admit that there are no thrills in the story. There's nothing really supernatural about it. Only it does show the power of oral tradition when you think of a bastard form of the black mass surviving like this for hundreds of years under the very noses of the pedagogues."

"It shows too," said Freeman, "what we have to suffer from incompetent headmasters. Now at the place I was telling you about where I've entered my boy—and I wish I could show you their workshops and art rooms—they've got a fellow who is——"

"What was the name of the school?" interrupted Harborough.

"Whitechurch Abbey."

W. F. HARVEY

“And a fortnight ago, you say, two boys were expelled for a raid on a hen roost?”

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s the same place that I’ve been talking about. The Dabblers were out.”

“Act V,” said Scott, “and curtain. Harborough, you’ve got your thrill after all.”



# “Happy Birthday, Dear Alex”

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JOHN KEIR CROSS

I am, essentially, I think, a simple man.

I make the statement with no kind of false modesty: it is only something that has become apparent as my long life has gone on and I have failed so often, until it is too late, to comprehend the small complexities with which we are all surrounded from day to day.

I shall even be simple in setting down this particular incident in my life—I shall have no skill in any kind of story-telling about it, and so you will see through it all long before I may reach a particular point which someone more skilful in the art of writing would have been able to mask for dramatic effect. You will see through Hare’s terrible secret from the start, I daresay, where I never did till it all was almost over.

His shop was in a small side-street. From the start I should perhaps have suspected something sinister from the very air and atmosphere of the place, yet naturally, on such a quest, one hardly expected anything other than a slightly unusual flavour, shall I say. Certainly the other shops I had previously visited were also peculiar in one way or another, even the one that was very large and medicated in Marylebone. No doubt the association from the commodity I was seeking predisposed one to subjective impressions somewhat macabre.

The commodity in question was to be a gift for my young cousin Alex. It was, in fact, to be a birthday gift—how strange a birthday gift!—yet one that would be curiously welcome. One hardly quite knew where to begin—it is, after all, not the kind



## JOHN KEIR CROSS

of gruesome relic that one is likely to wish to purchase every day; one had certainly no realisation that there was even a positive shortage of the articles, with consequent visions of patient queues of earnest students assembled outside a supplier momentarily well-stocked. But it all was so; and after a while there came even to be a sense of mild excitement in the quest, as source after source was explored unavailingly, yet more and more clues were uncovered as to possible further milieux for enquiry. . .

You will note, no doubt—I realise it myself reading back this laborious opening of mine (laborious since, as I have said, I am no skilled writer)—that I have, probably from some lingering sense of delicacy, so far avoided any open mention by name of the commodity's nature. Let me come to it boldly and straightly, then: the object I sought to purchase was none other than a human skeleton! And the explanation for the horrid search is simplicity itself—as again you will plainly have guessed: my cousin was a medical student, engaged conscientiously in a meditation upon the mysteries of anatomy. . .

I do not exaggerate, incidentally, when I say that at the period of which I write so inexpertly, the objects in question were in great demand and short supply. I had even read a mildly humorous article in *The Times* not long before to that very effect—one of the inimitable fourth leaders of that notable journal which still, behind a façade of some light-heartedness, announced the undoubted fact that for one reason or another, skeletons for medical study purposes had become extremely difficult to obtain, and those that were available, even at third or fourth hand, as their owners progressed beyond the necessity of further study, were outside the purses of most young medicos. It was where I thought I might be of some assistance; Alex had been in the search for some time, only to find that indeed the prices were outrageous, where I, more fortunately endowed with this world's goods through a pleasing inheritance some years previously, might be able to be of some worthwhile family assistance—and with Alex's birthday not far in the offing, might also (if the mild



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX”

jest may be permitted) kill two birds, as it were, with one somewhat costly stone.

My first difficulty, however, was to know even where to begin, as I think I have already stated. But by dint of some discreet enquiry among medical friends—even of Alex during a supposedly social visit only—I eventually found myself on the long trail, calling one bright spring morning at that large and distinguished-looking shop in Marylebone.

I was interviewed by a young man of superior smartness, with a curiously clean and—if I may say—a sterile look. As I moved forward to confront him, I found myself almost slipping on the excessively polished linoleum beneath my feet. All around me were glistening machines and implements of unknown medical functionalism—trays and boxes of neat cold forceps, curiously shaped scissors, small knives, contrivances spouting arrays of red rubber tubings. At the back, where the light—perhaps fortunately—was somewhat shady, there were some shelves of silent bottles, with nameless shapes afloat in their spirituous depths. About the whole place was an elusive odour of linoleum polish and formalin. I found myself oppressed, but the thought of young Alex's forthcoming pleasure sustained me.

The assistant inclined a somewhat oleaginous but courteous head, with a murmured request that I should state my requirement.

“I want,” I began, with some initial nervousness, “—I want to purchase—ah—not for myself, you understand—for a friend—a cousin, in fact . . . I—ah—had wanted to enquire about the possibility of obtaining——”

At that moment, as I glanced somewhat timidly about me, I saw, calmly regarding me from a small pedestal, a prime specimen of the object of my very search. The disinterested glare of the hollow orbs unnerved me a little, then I was able to give a small exclamation of satisfaction as I gestured towards it.

“A skeleton, sir?” The young man's tone held a trace, I thought, of professional sorrow—as if, almost, I were a near relative of the deceased we both now contemplated, swaying a



## JOHN KEIR CROSS

little on its suspending wires. I remember reflecting, even in the moment, how unexpectedly small we are untrammelled at last by flesh—those little spindly bones of ours, so frail-seeming against the might of the world: the perpetual grin of our hapless mouths behind whatever expression of grief or soft sentiment our lips might once have worn: our dry small cage of a chest enclosing hearts that once throbbed deliriously in joy or passion: our boxy little skulls within whose confines noble thoughts may once have raced, whole symphonies or epics been composed, the plans of great cathedrals limned . . . So went my simple thoughts, until I became aware that the young man was still speaking in his smoothly modulated way:

“Articulated, of course?”

“Of course,” I nodded. Unacquainted with the terminologies I assumed that the expert before me must have some profound purposes in his “of course”. Besides, I recollected Alex having said something too about this need for “articulation” in the article.

“Somewhat in this manner, perhaps,” went on the young man gravely, stepping forward towards our solitary companion and touching a wire stretched almost invisibly along the spine.

Instantly, with a small dry rustling—hardly more than a whisper through the antiseptic silence—He Who Once Had Been executed a deft brief convulsion of all his members simultaneously. He quivered and revolved with a delicate waving of arms, an inclination of legs, a pointing of slender toes. He engaged in a total arabesque, a chilly mechanical ecstasy of interrelated bones and silver pivotal pins, through all his tiny joints . . . and, as I started back a little, involuntarily apprehensive, the young man beside me said reverentially, in such a tone as I might once have used myself in my distant youth in a contemplation of Madame Pavlova, no less:

“Beautiful—ah, beautiful! Such poise, such balance, sir—such exquisite co-ordination!”

Then, with a further humble moment before the great dancer



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX”

now slowly settling to no more than a lingering wavy tremor, he turned to me suddenly, briskly.

“I’m sorry, sir—deeply sorry. We are quite out of stock.”

“Nothing at all?” I asked, as one might ask in the normal course of day-to-day shopping when confronted with a shortage of, say, summer shirtings during the holiday season or warm underwear with the approach of winter.

“Nothing, sir. Our supplies are very limited—the demand of late has been quite remarkable.”

“To what,” I asked academically, “do you attribute such a curious state of——” I had almost said “trading”, then changed to “shortage in the line?”

“It’s difficult to say, sir. At one time we carried almost more of the articles in our stock-rooms than we had space for—we frequently had to dismember them entirely so as to be able to find accommodation; for as you will understand, it is an easier matter to group, say, all the tibiae, all the fibulae, in one shelf, with all the metacarpals in another and so forth, than to pack the fully assembled items together with any . . . well . . . comfort.”

(I groped a little at his undoubtedly strange use of the word “comfort”, visualising that unimaginable stock-room somewhere below and far away—beyond the shady bottles on the further shelves, perhaps . . .)

“You haven’t, by any chance——” and I hesitated again, wondering how one might convey the possibility of an under-the-counter purchase, recollecting one’s wartime habits in the acquiring of tobacco or whisky, for example.

“Nothing at all, sir,” he said severely. “We think sometimes that it may all be due to the Health Service in some indefinable way—no doubt that people are living longer, perhaps——”

“No doubt,” I said vaguely.

“—or even that patients are tending to die in their beds rather than in the unnamed wards of hospitals. We had some useful connections in the better times with the riverside morgues, for an instance; but somehow suicides are less frequent than they

## JOHN KEIR CROSS

were—or rather, should I say, the present-day practitioners tend to stay at home rather more. The genial sleeping-draught overdose has come somewhat to the fore; and so one is more in the position of being found by relatives or friends and given—as they say—a decent burial.”

He contrived to inject an odd flavour of distaste and even disapproval into his tone.

“These things move in trends, of course,” he concluded with a sigh. “One can hardly predict or even comprehend the general movements in trade. And it was never, of course, the kind of commodity that could be . . . well, as one might say . . . made to measure. It is hardly a case for the assembly line.”

“Plastics?” I murmured tentatively, with visions of a fortune to be made in a factory established somewhere in the Midlands, the young men and women streaming to work each morning on bicycles, the staff canteens, the Sports Welfare Clubs, the whole great machinery of modern industry geared towards meeting the strange demand. Yet I realised on the instant that I had made an immense faux-pas. He regarded me with an ill-concealed pity.

“It would hardly perhaps serve, sir. In our profession we must observe the proprieties. We are dealing, I think, with Fundamentals. Plastics would be hardly . . . well . . . worthy, shall I say?”

There remained one more possibility. Small as he had made me feel, I screwed myself to the suggestion.

“Perhaps,” I said, with a somewhat forlorn gesture, “—perhaps that model there——?”

He froze to an immobility as marked as that of the now still subject of our whole discourse.

“I beg your pardon, sir! It is for exhibition only. It has been with us since the initial establishment of our whole business. It is in fact—and was bequeathed as such, so that, as he put it in his will, he might constantly be in a position to watch our progress—it is, in fact, our original Founder . . . Good-morning, sir: I am sorry not to have been able to have been of more assistance.”

I crept into the bright sunshine. With one backward apologetic



## “HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX”

glance I saw him stare after me with an expression of supreme distaste on his face. I could have sworn, in the shadows there, that he then turned for a moment and bowed to that small dangling shape that once had trotted so briskly, so joyously, through the very medicated doorway from which I had that instant emerged. . . . I told you, I think, that I was—and indeed still am—an unsophisticated man. . . .

I will not weary you with a full account of my peregrinations. At every turn I met only frustration. I visited shops of a like nature to, but less opulent than, that veritable temple in Marylebone. But the tale was constantly the same—a hundred assistants, some sympathetic, some brusque, some positively rude, announced the identical dismal state of affairs. Skulls—yes, occasionally; isolated tibiae or fibulae, possibly; complete feet more rarely, but still at least remotely; pelvises—by some strange freak, pelvises by the score: but fully articulateds?—no, sir! One very aged proprietor of a small supplier off Holborn told me gloomily, being more courteous than most dealers that I encountered:

“I’ve been in the trade man and boy, sir, for sixty year and more; and I’ve known nothing like it, nothing, not since the days of the great ’Uman ’Eart shortage in ’02.”

“And what was that?” I enquired, offering him a cigar, which he took with some absence of mind, his eyes fixed nostalgically on that distant past.

“Terrible times, sir, terrible. In the old days we done quite a trade on the side in ’Uman ’Earts—Aitch-Aitches as we used to call ’em. Pickled ’em in acid and such and used to put ’em up in handy little jars that we bought wholesale from the jam factory down the road—changed the labels, o’ course. You won’t remember them old times of the Pawning Days?”

I shook my head. By this time, you will comprehend, I had acquired a positive interest, if not a thorough fascination for the whole subject. The Pawning Days—the unimaginable Pawning Days!

“When you was down and out,” said my informant, leaning

## JOHN KEIR CROSS

confidentially over a counter littered with second-hand syringes, scalpels, tweezers, stethoscopes and the like, “—which I don’t suppose you’ve never been in all your life, sir, nor never hope to . . . but when you was down and out in them old days, and you’d pawned your watch and your overcoat and your spare elastic-sideds and such, and the old rolled gold medallion with your mother’s picture inside and a lock of hair, there was still one thing left that you could pawn, and it was yourself.”

“Yourself,” I said non-committally.

“Yourself, sir. You went into St. William’s Orspital, like, and you said ‘Ere I am, what’s left of me. And they said Good, sign here. And they gave you a form, sir, and it said on it that in exchange for a five-pun note you hereby bequeathed your body to medical science for research when such time should arrive as you passed on, see. Now, if you signed another form which said as you’d never smoked or had a drink and never would, then you got another fiver, and that made ten. So off you went with your cash, see, and that was you fixed. But if times got better for you—if you maybe came into a fortune or such—you could always go and get yourself out again; and if you were a five-pound job that would cost eight, see, ’cos they had to have their profit, but if you was a ten-pounder it was eighteen, ’cos they reckoned that if you didn’t smoke and didn’t drink they’d have had longer to wait anyways, and so the interest was higher, like. But there wasn’t many as was able to redeem themselves that way, and so they was the great times for Aitch-Aitches, and skeletons too, see.”

“And what happened in ’02 to put an end to it all?” I asked.

“Reckon the Orspitals got wise to it, see. ’Cos after St. William’s started it, every other Orspital ran a scheme too. And there was chaps that made a regular living out of going round ’em all and signing papers right left and centre so that when the time came nobody knew what tibia belonged to who and what fibula belonged to t’other. So in ’02 they all stopped simultaneous, and there we were—not an Aitch-Aitch in the place there weren’t.”



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX”

He stayed gloomily contemplating that terrible period of slump, then shook himself.

“Ah well, times picked up a bit after all, in the 20’s, I s’pose, ’cos of the fashionable suicide wave, see; but now they’ve settled back again, now that folk are more home-keeping and we’ve the Health Service and such——” and in his more homely way he repeated the curious argument of my supercilious friend of Marylebone.

I left him at last with a desolate conviction that the day would never come when I would be able to provide poor Alex with a birthday present—particularly with that birthday looming constantly nearer and nearer. He gave me only one word of possible comfort:

“Take my advice, sir, and don’t go round the medical suppliers. We’re all in the same boat, see. Pawn-shops—that’s the ticket.”

“Pawn-shops?”

“Yes, sir—them or the second-hand lads down side-streets. You see, the only time one of Them There comes on the market is when some young student chap like this cousin of yours you was telling me about gets hard-up sudden-like. So they round the corner to Uncle with Whats-’is-Name slung over their shoulder. and that’s good for a tenner, you know, ’cos with things as they are Uncle can sell ’em again for as much as thirty and forty to chaps like you as is on the search, see. Mind you, mostly they’re pretty old and falling to bits by the time they gets to Uncle, but even so there’s sometimes something young and tasty like will turn up. So you just go on that tack, sir—there’s a little shop in Camberwell I can give you the address of, that’s been running Them-Theres for quite a time as a speciality—if you mention my name he’ll see you straight . . .”

He gave me the address and I visited Camberwell. And so, eventually, the long trail drew towards its conclusion as I came in sight of Mr. Hare. . . .

—But not at first—not still for some little time. I had some further dismal rounds to perambulate. By this time the tension

## JOHN KEIR CROSS

was rising within me to some positive degree of discomfort. The birthday was drawing closer and closer, yet still I saw little chance of success. And something else had arisen to occasion worry—something which might have held some element of the ludicrous were it not for the danger I saw in it that my whole scheme of a pleasant surprise for my young cousin might topple to desolate failure.

As I had moved from shop to shop on my quest, I had sometimes been aware of occasional faces becoming increasingly familiar—mostly of young men standing beside me at the various counters awaiting their turn, or approaching them as I withdrew. From a muttered remark once overheard, it one day dawned on me that these were none other than seekers like myself—young medicos who were also on the trail, chasing the elusive skeletons from shop to shop as I was. It was a simple step towards the further apprehensive thought that even Alex might be searching among those others—that there was consequently a chance, however remote a chance, that I might be forestalled!

The consideration quite appalled me. With the final examinations comparatively near at hand, Alex's need for a skeleton to study was growing quite imperative—it was why I had known from the first that my projected gift would be so singularly welcome to that studious cousin of mine. I had never disclosed my intention—in all gifts, I have always felt in my simple way, there should be an element of surprise. It was more than likely that in what little time could be spared from study, Alex would be seeking to obtain that curious heart's desire I also sought . . . and if our paths should cross——!

I had veritable confirmation of the danger on the very day of my visit to the little shop in Camberwell that had been recommended by the friendly dealer in Holborn. At the very moment of my approach to it I saw Alex's familiar figure hurrying out!

I concealed myself in a convenient doorway, then made my own way forward. The shop was small and dark—a misery of ancient junk of every description, the entire stock piled high in the single evil-smelling room—great heaps of soiled clothes, piles



"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX"

of cracked crockery, broken tables, crooked chairs . . . but as far as I could see, no skeletons.

"No, sir," said the dealer gloomily, when I made my need known to him. "Not in two years I ain't seen one. Old Joe up Holborn way was right, though—used to deal in 'em regular. It's just that somehow they're so hard to come by now I've give it up."

"Tell me," I said hastily, "—that young student who came in a moment before me . . . I think I know the face. As a matter of interest——"

The dealer smiled before I had completed the very sentence.

"Exactly the same, sir," he said. "I was just thinking how queer it was. Wanted one o' Them There too. In fact, there's several been in lately—might be worth my while to start up trade again, if I can even lay my hands on the stuff. Only thing is"—and he suddenly shrugged—"I doubt if it would even be worth it. These young folk these days hardly have a chance, have they?"

"Why?" I asked.

"Cash, see. Even if I got one or two in I could hardly sell 'em under forty or forty-five smackers . . . and it ain't every youngker of a student could lay hands on that amount of cash."

He was right, of course—and I saw a sudden ray of hope. From my knowledge of Alex's resources it was only too plain that the purchase would be quite out of the question. Whereas I had only to trace the one physical object—one single skeleton in reasonable repair and, of course, articulated—poor Alex had to go further and find one at the very most costing ten or fifteen; and, with the demand as it plainly was, there was little likelihood of that.

I acquired a new confidence—yet still had a lingering far-off edge of apprehension. I sped from shop to shop—from Camberwell to Kentish Town, on an elusive trail thereafter to a pawnbroker in Cheapside who had been recommended—to a tangled junk-yard in the Minories—to an aged surly crone almost invisible behind the ranked-high horrors of a used-clothing store in Rotherhithe.

## JOHN KEIR CROSS

It was she who gave me, with some reluctance at first, an address in Pimlico—then suddenly, peering closely at me, cackled quite hideously as she repeated it.

I found the side-street in a maze of crooked alleys and vennels behind Sloane Square—saw the name in blistered paintwork above the most wretched shop my eyes had ever confronted: “W. Hare, General Dealer.” Having learned my lesson in Camberwell, I reconnoitred the neighbourhood with some care for a possible sign of Alex; then, satisfied, pushed forward and entered.

A cracked bell tinkled dismally through a musty dark silence. A small withered creature wearing a black skull-cap came forward from the shadows. I babbled my request in some haste, anxious to escape from the whole unpleasant place as quickly as I could. I had even turned to the door again, so conditioned had I become to constant bleak refusal. But suddenly my distaste for my surroundings was swallowed in a great wave of relief as I heard Hare’s thin and melancholy voice:

“Why yes, sir. I think I might be able to accommodate you. If you will give me a few particulars, perhaps. . .?”

For all his small repulsiveness I might almost in that exciting moment have embraced him!

He leaned closely to me across his piled counter. I perched as well as I could on a rachitic chair which, although plainly set out for the convenience of customers, still bore a price-ticket: seven-and-six.

With my eyes a little accustomed to the gloom I found myself gazing into the most horrible face I have ever seen. It was itself, almost, a skull. The lips were thin and cracked, drawn in a perpetual rictus-grin from teeth that were totally black. The skin stretched yellowly across his high cheek-bones was so taut as almost to seem transparent—there was a momentary horrid temptation to set out a finger to poke through it bloodlessly, as if it were parchment. The eyes were pale and curiously glazed, with no spark of life in them, hooded beneath crusted and rheumy lids . . . the man was a living corpse.



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX”

And from him, or from the monstrous assembly of mysteries in that shop of his, there was a smell unconscionably repulsive. What its true nature was I had no notion—yet it was a condensation somehow of a smell I had encountered before: somehow animal—somehow associated with . . . with what? I am a simple man: perhaps, in that moment, if I had been a little more worldly-wise for all my years—however. . .

“You will realise,” he was saying in his soft toneless voice, “that it may take a day or two before I can lay my hands on a specimen. I have none in stock, as it happens——”

“How long?” I asked impatiently. With my first relief now over I was only anxious again to escape from the oppressive atmosphere of that dark and evil corner of London.

“A week, shall we say? I must negotiate with my contacts.”

“A week! Great heavens, man,” I almost shouted, “I can’t wait a week! It’s for a——”

Yet I hesitated. It seemed grotesque, suddenly, even in that place so grotesque itself, to announce that the object was required for a gift. I was mentally calculating dates—and realised that in all my general excitement I had had an impression of time more pressing than it actually was. A week from the 4th would be the 11th—the very day itself of the birthday.

“You could guarantee it in a week?” I asked.

“Most certainly—indeed quite definitely, sir. Articulated, of course?”

“Articulated,” I said.

“And . . . as to size? Would you require something on the larger side or the smaller, perhaps?”

The thing was absurd, of course. I could only stare at him for a moment. He spoke in his toneless way as a tailor might, discussing one’s next suit. He had a small, much-fingered notebook on the counter before him—held over it the grimed stub of a pencil in fingers quite hideously crooked, all marked and burned with strange yellow stains.

“It . . . it hardly matters,” I said—somewhat lamely I feel now—in something of an anti-climax after all my tension. My

JOHN KEIR CROSS

aim—my only aim—was to buy the thing: it was even absurd, after everything I had been through, to discover that there might be such a thing as a choice in the matter.

“I would suggest small, sir,” he said smoothly, writing carefully. “They are somewhat easier for me to obtain—and are, of course, more portable. So. And male?—or female?”

Again I could only stare. The choice was still more bizarre. Was there even any difference?—Alex had never once suggested any kind of preference. Beyond a dim recollection of some Biblical lore about more or fewer ribs, I could not conceive of any vital reason why one sex should be more or less suitable for the purposes of study than the other.

He saw my hesitation and fluted quietly:

“Then if I may suggest again, sir, female. They also are a little easier for me to obtain. And besides, in the thought of the more delicate flesh once enclosing them——”

He broke off his intolerable leer as he saw the expression on my face. I believe I might almost have struck him!

“You will require it packed, sir?” he asked, even a little hastily, turning the dangerous corner. “I have a consignment of suitable light-weight cardboard boxes I usually use for the purpose.”

The very question of transport had never occurred to me. I had had a far notion, in the earlier days of the search, of an arrangement with Carter Paterson or some such firm of conveyors of general merchandise. I saw now that if I was collecting the gift on the very day I was also having to deliver it, I would have to remove it and transport it myself. Were such things heavy, I wondered?—would the box fit comfortably into a taxi?

Again it was as if he read my thoughts.

“You will find it very light and easily carried, sir. If I might suggest a taxi-cab when you call——?”

I nodded again and rose.

“Yes—packed, then,” I said abruptly. “But I should like to examine it, of course, before I take it.”

“Of course, sir. It was my intention. I shall have it ready a



"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX"

week from today, and it will be a matter of moments to enclose it in the box after your examination."

He smiled with a hollow malevolence and shut the notebook with a snap.

"And the price, sir? Shall we say . . . fifty?"

It was larger than I had anticipated, even knowing the general situation. But I could ill afford a hesitation this time, with the end so happily at last in sight.

"Very well. Fifty."

"Guineas, sir?"

"Guineas!"

"Thank you, sir. And if I may suggest it, since you will be taking the article away with you . . . cash, sir?—rather than a cheque?"

"Cash, Mr. Hare!"

"Thank you, sir. I feel quite certain that you will be completely satisfied. Good evening, sir. A week from today—at shall we say eleven o'clock in the morning, perhaps, if that is convenient?"

I left him bowing across the counter, his yellow hands clasped tightly, the tassel of his skull-cap dangling over his thin hooked nose. I stumbled round silent heaps of rubbish—of monstrous vases set on pedestals, dead marble busts of no conceivable value, tall looming bric-à-brac stands in outmoded Victorian bamboo-work, poker-work, repulsively carved walnut . . . behind me the bell tinkled faintly as I achieved the blessed air away from the eternal smell and hurried from the shop as quickly as I could move. W. Hare—General Dealer!

It was the name, indeed, more than any other circumstance, that I found curiously lingering to haunt me. As the week passed by in a strange indolence after all the fury of my quest from that bare and antiseptic temple in Marylebone to the dingy horrors of the little shop in Pimlico, I found myself strangely repeating at odd moments simply: "W. Hare, W. Hare, W. Hare . . ." and seeking some elusive association—as elusive in its different way as the odour from the man which had so oppressed me. Yet whatever I might feel about his unpleasantness—

## JOHN KEIR CROSS

his positive evil, indeed, as I recollected his whole essence in that dusky place, leaning forward over his notebook—whatever I might feel, I had also to recognise that the man had saved me. And in that thought, as the week went on, I regained some measure of delight. I had exaggerated—my simple mind had grown infected through its piling disappointments, through the half-ludicrous gruesomeness of the whole adventure. When I encountered Hare again in the clearer light of day, his warped grotesqueness would reveal itself only as something subjective creeping through my own mind in a consideration of the macabre nature of the goods he purveyed. He was even, no doubt, a simple man like myself, of quiet tastes and lonely habits. . .

On the eve, my excitement mounted to a pitch where I could not sleep. I lay tossing for some hours, reflecting on the pleasure I was to give next day. I took a mouthful of brandy, and when it after all did not have the sporific effect I usually expect from it, I turned to my bedside bookshelf for consolation from my favourite Dickens.

It was when I read the passages referring to the nefarious secret occupation of the good Jerry Cruncher in the immortal *Tale of Two Cities* that I suddenly, with a small mortal chill, recalled the association in the name of that "General Dealer" of mine in Pimlico. Jerry Cruncher the Resurrectionist—those other notorious real-life Resurrectionists in the old Edinburgh of a hundred and fifty years ago . . . Burke and Hare—Burke and Hare. . .

I almost laughed aloud in the suddenly realised folly of it all. The thing was a coincidence and an association, no more. Nevertheless, it made me lose for once my taste for the Master and I tossed the book aside, seizing instead another favourite—a volume of the enchanting short stories of the good O. Henry . . . and opening it by another coincidence—an altogether happier one—at that famous little masterpiece about birthdays and birthday presents, *The Gifts of the Magi*.

In its lulling sentimental influence I fell asleep at last, and woke to a bright and cheerful morning, all horror vanished.



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX”

The mood still lingered as I directed my cab-driver to the little street in Pimlico. Indeed and indeed my fears and imaginings had been the merest shadows! The very shop in the bright sunlight was almost cheerful in its ridiculous window-display of old rugs and tarnished silverware, its shelves of outspread books at threepence and sixpence per volume. I entered it blithely, determined against any recurrence of the old oppression, and found Hare already awaiting me, his hands as always clasped before him, his skull-cap tassel dangling.

The smell was still about me but I hardly noticed it—was determined at least to ignore it. There was little time, indeed, to notice anything in the sudden contemplation in that magic moment of the object at last of all my searching—for there, set up against the end of the counter, was the beautiful thing itself!

And you know, in a curious way it even was quite beautiful to me at that moment, even apart from all the pleasure of its finding, the further pleasure it would give. In *itself* it had a strange beauty—the slightly yellowed bones so cunningly fitted, the gleam here and there of the tarnished silver articulation pins and wires. Not the face, perhaps—or the lack of face: a skull can never be beautiful . . . but somehow the whole marvellous framework of it, once the supports of the very uttermost marvel of all God’s universe!

The dealer had set it in one of those tall, specially made cardboard boxes of his, the lid of it waiting in readiness on the floor. He asked if I wished to examine the articulation more closely but I shook my head—apart from my inexpertness, I knew at a glance that the thing was as perfect a specimen as could be obtained. I almost chuckled to little harmless Hare in my delight as he set to fitting the lid in position and tying the whole long parcel for me with white new string, strangely out of place in that shop of dingy second-handness. I counted out the notes I had obtained from my bank on the way to Pimlico—found I had no ten-shilling notes and cheerfully, as Hare fumbled in a pocket for change, cried:

JOHN KEIR CROSS

"Leave it so, Mr. Hare, at fifty-three! You deserve it!"

In its box the skeleton was smaller than it had even seemed before—I had a recurrence of my philosophic thoughts from Marylebone. And it was after all quite curiously light, as Hare had said—I could carry it with the greatest ease to the waiting taxi.

"I marked, sir," he said, as he opened his tinkling door for me, "a small H in pencil at the head end, so that you can keep it upright as you carry it, before unpacking. It will avoid damage to the articulation."

It was a small and friendly touch, I felt, and I smiled to him as he stooped in a final bow to me on the pavement.

The girl who lived with Alex opened the door of the flat to me. She was an engaging, nubile young creature, I had always felt, named Miriam. I propped my box—head upwards, of course—against the lintel, smiling to her; yet noticing too that she wore an unexpectedly worried look.

"Alex isn't in," she said; and my triumphant moment vanished. I had built so carefully to it—so carefully! In my simplicity it had never occurred to me to confirm that my young cousin would be available to receive my gift. I had a thought to go away and come back—to ask if I might wait. It was essential that the presentation should be carried out by myself and not by proxy, after all that I had gone through. But Miriam was speaking again.

"It's been worrying me to death," she said. "Of course, we only live together, and I naturally can't be expected to be given a note of all Alex's movements; but to have gone away for so long without a single word——"

She broke off almost petulantly, regarding me in the gloomy small corridor.

"For so long?" I asked, dazedly a little.

"A week nearly enough—and not a single word. It's *too* bad." I wonder if I had my first inkling even then?—in my simplicity? I gestured rather lamely to the tall package.



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR ALEX”

“It was to have been . . . a birthday gift,” I said desolately. Miriam smiled.

“Of course!—I’d forgotten the date! Alex must surely come back home for that! Do you want to leave it?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll leave it.”

I turned away. There was no other immediate emotion in me, I think, but a great detached sadness—over my own inability, through my simplicity, to comprehend after all the years the ironic bitterness of the bright world in which we live. I reflected too, I believe, on the strangeness of coincidence—that of all the tales in the world I should have been reading, the previous evening, that sweetly melancholy one of O. Henry’s about the people who all unwittingly give presents that can no longer be of any value to their recipients. . . .

“If you should see Alex,” cried Miriam after me, “tell her to let me know at least when she’s coming home.”

My foot, as I turned, had caught the edge of the package still leaning against the lintel. With a small whispering from its jostled contents it now fell forward into the hallway where Miriam stood, rocking gently for a moment at her feet.

“Alex,” I said, into infinity—“has come home.”

# The Small Assassin

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RAY BRADBURY

Just when the idea occurred to her that she was being murdered she could not tell. There had been little subtle signs, little suspicions for the past month; things as deep as sea tides in her, like looking at a perfectly calm stretch of cerulean water and liking it and wanting to bathe in it, and finding, just as the tide takes your body into it, that monsters dwell just under the surface, things unseen, bloated, many-armed, sharp-finned, malignant and inescapable.

A room floated around her in an effluvium of hysteria. Sharp instruments hovered and there were voices and people in sterile white masks.

My name, she thought. My name; what is it?

Alice Leiber. It came to her. David Leiber's wife. But it gave her no comfort. She was alone with these silent whispering white people and there was great pain and nausea and death-fear in her.

I am being murdered before their eyes. These doctors, these nurses don't realize what hidden thing has happened to me. David doesn't know. Nobody knows except me and—the killer, the small assassin, the little murderer.

I am dying and I can't tell them how. They'd laugh and call me one in delirium. They'll see the murderer and hold him and like him and they won't think him responsible for my death. Here I am, in front of God and man, dying, and there is no one to believe my story, everyone to doubt me, comfort me with lies, bury me in ignorance, mourn me and salvage my murderer.



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

Where is David? she wondered. In the outer room, smoking one cigarette after another, listening to the long tickings of the very slow clock?

Sweat exploded from all of her body at once, and with it a crying and agonizing. Now. Now! Try and kill me, she screamed. Try, try, but I won't die! I won't!

There was a hollow in her. A vacuity. Suddenly there was no pain. Exhaustion. Blackness. It was over. It was all over. Oh, God. She plummeted rapidly down and struck against a black nothingness which gave way to another nothing and another nothing and another and still another. . . .

Footsteps. Gentle, approaching footsteps. The sound of people trying to be quiet.

Far away, a voice said, "She's asleep. Don't disturb her."

An odour of tweeds, a pipe, a certain shaving lotion. She knew David was standing over her. And beyond him the immaculate odour of Dr. Jeffers.

She did not open her eyes. "I'm awake," she said, quietly. It was a surprise, a relief to be able to speak, to not be dead.

"Alice," someone said, and it was David beyond her closed eyes, his hands holding one of her tired ones.

Would you like to meet the murderer, David? she thought. That's who you're here to see now, aren't you? I hear your voice asking to see him, so there's nothing but for me to point him out to you.

David stood over her. She opened her eyes. The room came into focus. Moving a weak hand she pulled aside a coverlet.

The murderer looked up at David Leiber with a small red-faced, blue-eyed calm. Its eyes were deep and sparkling.

"Why!" cried David Leiber, smiling. "Why, he's a *fine* baby!"

Dr. Jeffers was waiting for David Leiber the day he showed up at the hospital to take his wife and new child home. He motioned Leiber into a chair in his office, gave him a cigar, lit one for himself, sat on the edge of his desk, puffing solemnly for

RAY BRADBURY

a long moment. Then he cleared his throat, looked David Leiber straight in the eye and said, "Your wife doesn't like her child, Dave."

"What!"

"It's been a hard thing for her. The whole thing. She'll need a lot of love in this next year. I didn't say much at the time, but she was hysterical in the delivery room. The strange things she said. I won't repeat them. All I'll say is that she feels alien to the child. Now, this may simply be a thing we can clear up with one or two questions." He sucked on his cigar another moment, then said, "Is this child a 'wanted' child, Dave?"

"Why do you ask?"

"It's vital."

"Yes. Yes, it is a 'wanted' child. It was planned. We planned it together. Alice was so happy, a year ago, when——"

"Mmm—that makes it more difficult. Because if the child was unplanned, it would be a simple case of a mother who hates the idea of motherhood. That doesn't fit Alice." Dr. Jeffers took his cigar from his lips, rubbed his hand across his jaw, tongued the inside of his cheek. "It must be something else, then. Perhaps something buried in her childhood that's coming out now. Or it might be the simple temporary doubt and distrust of any mother who's gone through the unusual pain and near-death that Alice has. If so, then a little time should heal that. I thought I'd tell you, though, Dave. It'll help you be easy and tolerant with her. If she says anything about—well—about wishing the child had been born dead, smooth it over, will you, son? And if things don't get along, the three of you drop in on me. I'm always glad to see old friends, eh? Here, take another cigar along for—ah—for the baby."

It was a bright spring afternoon. Their car hummed along wide, tree-lined boulevards. Blue sky, flowers, a warm wind. Dave talked a lot, lit his cigar, talked some more. Alice answered directly, softly, relaxing a bit more as the trip progressed. But she held the baby not tightly enough or warmly enough or



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

motherly enough to satisfy the queer ache in Dave's mind. She seemed to be merely carrying a porcelain figurine.

He tried joviality. "What'll we name him?" he asked.

Alice Leiber watched green trees slide by. "Let's not name him yet," she said. "I'd rather wait until we get an exceptional name for him. Don't blow smoke in his face." Her sentences ran together with no distinction of tone between one or the other. The last statement held no motherly reproof, no interest, no irritation. She just mouthed it and it was said.

The husband, disquieted, dropped the cigar from the window. "Sorry," he said.

The baby rested in the crook of its mother's arm, shadows of sun and tree changing its face over and again. His blue eyes opened like fresh blue spring flowers. Moist noises came from the tiny, pink, elastic mouth.

Alice gave her baby a quick glance. Her husband felt her shiver against him.

"Cold?" he asked.

"A chill. Better raise the window, David."

It was more than a chill. He rolled the window thoughtfully up.

Supper time.

Candles flickered odd dances of light-shadow about the large, amply-furnished dining-room. There was good familiarity in eating together again for both of them; friendliness and relaxation in passing salt or sharing the last biscuit, or commenting on flavours.

David Leiber had brought the child from the nursery, propped him at a tiny, bewildered angle, supported by many pillows, in a newly purchased high-chair.

Alice watched her knife and fork move. "He's not high-chair size," she said.

"Fun having him here, anyway," said Leiber, feeling fine. "Everything's fun. At the office, too. Orders up to my nose. If I don't watch myself I'll make another fifteen thousand this year. Hey, look at Junior, will you? Drooling all down his chin!" He

reached over to dab at the baby's chin with his napkin. From the corner of his eye he realized that Alice wasn't even watching. He finished the job.

"I guess it wasn't very interesting," he said, back again at his food. A minor irritation rose in him, disregarding all self-argument. "But one would think a mother'd take some interest in her own child, wouldn't one?"

Alice jerked her chin up. "Don't speak that way. Not in *front of him*! Later, if you must."

"Later?" he cried. "In front of, in back of, what's the difference?" He quieted suddenly, swallowed, was sorry. "All right. Okay. I know how it is."

After dinner she let him carry the baby upstairs. She didn't tell him to; she *let* him.

Coming down, he found her standing by the radio, listening to music she wasn't hearing. Her eyes were closed, her whole attitude one of wondering, self-questioning. She started when he appeared.

Suddenly, she was at him, against him, soft, quick; the same. Nothing different. Her lips found him, kept him. He was stunned by her. He laughed, unexpectedly, and deeply. Something cold in him thawed and melted; like fear of winter melting at spring, his fear went now. Now that the baby was gone, upstairs, out of the room, she began to breathe again, live again. She was free. And this in itself made a subtle worry in him, but he let it go, enjoyed her being against him. She was whispering, rapidly, endlessly.

"Thank you, thank you, darling. For being yourself, always. Yourself, you, and nobody and nothing else! Dependable, so very dependable!"

He had to laugh. "My father told me, 'Son, provide for your family!' "

Wearily, she rested her dark, shining hair against his neck. "You've overdone it. Sometimes I wish we were just the way we were when we were first married. No responsibilities, nothing but ourselves. No—no babies."



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

She took him too eagerly by the hand, a flushed strangeness in her white face, unnaturally intense. It seemed there were many things for her to say and couldn't, so she said the next best thing, a fair substitute.

"A third element's come in. Before, it was just you and I. We protected each other, and now we protect the baby, but get no protection from it. Do you understand? Lying in the hospital I had time to think a lot of things. The world is evil——"

"Is it?" he said.

"Yes. It is. But laws protect us from it. And when there aren't laws, then love does the protecting. You're protected from my hurting you, by my love. You're vulnerable to me, of all people, but love shields you. I feel no fear of you, because love cushions all your irritations, unnatural instincts, hatreds and immaturities. But—what about the baby? It's too young to know love, or a law of love, or anything, until we teach it."

"We'll teach it, then."

"And in the meantime be vulnerable to it!"

"Vulnerable? To a baby?" He held her away from him and laughed gently at her.

"Does a baby know the difference between rights and wrongs?" she asked.

"No. But it'll learn."

"But a baby is so new, so amoral, so conscience-free," she argued. She stopped. Her arms dropped from him and she turned swiftly. "That noise? What was it?"

Leiber looked around the room. "I didn't hear——"

She stared at the library door. "In there," she said, slowly.

Leiber crossed the room and opened the door and switched the library lights on and off. "Not a thing," he said, and came back to her. "You're worn. To bed with you; *right now*."

Turning out the lights together, they walked quietly up the soundless hall stairs, not speaking. At the top she apologized. "My wild talk, darling. Forgive me. I'm just exhausted."

He understood, and said so.

She paused, undecided, by the nursery door. Then she

fingered the brass knob sharply, walked in. He watched her approach the crib much too carefully, look down, and stiffen as if she'd been struck in the face. "David!"

Leiber stepped forward, reached the crib, and looked down.

The baby's face was bright red and very moist. The little pink mouth gestured. Bright blue eyes stared as if being strangled outward. Small red hands weaved in the air.

"Oh, he's just been crying," said Leiber.

"Has he?" Alice Leiber grasped the crib-railing to hold herself erect. "I didn't *hear* him crying."

"The door was closed."

"Is that why he breathes so hard, why his face is red?"

"Sure. Poor little guy. Crying all alone in the dark. He can sleep in our room tonight, just in case he cries."

"You'll spoil him," his wife said.

Leiber felt her eyes follow as he rolled the crib into their bedroom. He undressed silently, sat on the edge of the bed. Suddenly he lifted his head, swore under his breath, snapped his fingers. "Damn it. Forgot to tell you. Have to fly to Chicago Friday."

"Oh, David." She seemed a little lost girl. "So soon?"

"I've put this trip off for two months, and now it's so critical I just *have* to make it."

"I'm afraid to be alone."

"We'll have the new cook here by Friday. She'll be here all the time. All you have to do is call. I'll only be away a little while."

"But I'm afraid. I don't know of what. You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I guess I'm crazy."

He was in bed now. She darkened the room; he heard her walk around the bed, throw back crisp sheets, slide in. He smelled the warm woman smell of her next to him. He said, "If you want me to wait a few extra days, perhaps I could——"

"No," she said unconvinced. "You go. I know it's important. It's just that I keep thinking about what I told you. Laws and love and protection. Love protects you from me. But the baby——" She took a breath. "*What* protects you from him, David?"



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

Before he could answer, before he could tell her how silly it was, speaking of infants, she switched on the bed light, abruptly.

"Look," she said, pointing.

The baby lay wide awake in its crib, staring straight at him, with deep, sharp, blue eyes. The eyes closed.

The lights went out again. She trembled against him.

"It's not nice, being afraid of the thing you birthed." Her whisper lowered, became harsh, fierce, swift. "He tried to kill me! He lies there, listens to us talking, waiting for you to go away so he can try to kill me again! I swear it!"

Sobs broke from her he could not stop by holding her. "Please," he kept saying, soothing her. "Stop it, stop it. Please."

She cried in the dark for a long time. Very late she relaxed, shakingly, against him. Her breathing came soft, warm, regular, her body twitched its worn reflexes and she slept.

He drowsed.

And just before his eyes lidded wearily down, sinking into the deep sleep tides, he heard a strange little sound of awareness and awakeness in the room.

The sound of moist, small, pinkly elastic lips.

The baby.

And then—sleep.

In the morning the sun blazed. Alice smiled.

David Leiber dangled his watch over the crib. "See, baby? Something bright. Something pretty. Sure. Sure. Something bright. Something pretty."

Alice smiled. She told him to go ahead, fly to Chicago, she'd try to be a brave girl, no need to worry. She'd take care of baby. Oh, yes, she'd take care of *him*, all right. This last she said with a peculiar emphasis, which David Leiber ignored.

The airplane went east with Leiber. There was a lot of sky, a lot of sun and clouds and then Chicago came running over the horizon. Leiber was dropped into the rush of ordering, planning, banqueting, making the rounds, telephoning, arguing in



conference, downing coffee in scalding gulps between times. But he wrote letters each day and sent telegrams that said brief, nice, direct things to Alice and baby.

On the evening of his sixth day away from home he received the long-distance phone call. Los Angeles.

"Alice?"

"No, Dave. This is Jeffers speaking."

"Doctor!"

"Hold on to yourself, son. Alice is sick. You'd better get the next plane home. It's pneumonia. I'll do everything I can, boy. If only it wasn't so soon after the baby. She needs strength."

Leiber dropped the phone into its cradle. He got up, with no feet under him, and no hands and no body. The hotel room blurred and fell apart.

"Alice," he said, blindly. Starting for the door.

The airplane went west and California came up, and out of the twisting circular metal of propellers came a vibrantly sudden materialization of Alice lying in bed, Dr. Jeffers standing in the sunlight at a window, and the reality of Leiber feeling his feet walking slowly, becoming more real and more real, until, when he reached her bed, everything was whole, intact, a reality.

Nobody spoke. Alice smiled, faintly. Jeffers talked, but only a little of it got through to David.

"Your wife's too good a mother, son. She worried more about your baby than about herself. . . ."

A muscle in Alice's cheek flattened out, taut, then.

Alice began to talk. She talked like a mother should, now. Or did she—— Wasn't there a trace of anger, fear, repulsion in her voice? Dr. Jeffers didn't notice it, but *he* wasn't looking for it.

"The baby wouldn't sleep," said Alice. "I thought he was sick. He just lay in his crib, staring. Late at night, he'd cry. Loud. He cried all night and all night. I couldn't quiet him. I couldn't sleep."

Dr. Jeffers nodded. "Tired herself right into pneumonia. But she's full of sulpha drug now, and she's on the safe side."



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

Leiber felt ill. "The baby, what about *him*?"

"Chipper as ever; healthy as a cock."

"Thanks, doctor."

The doctor took leave, walked down the stairs, opened the front door faintly, and was gone. Leiber listened to him go.

"David!"

He turned to her whisper.

"It was the baby again," she said. "I try to lie to myself—convince myself I'm a fool. But the baby knew I was weak from the hospital. So he cried all night. And when he wasn't crying he'd be *too quiet*. If I switched the light on he'd be there, staring at me."

Leiber jerked inside. He remembered seeing the baby, awake in the dark, himself. Awake very late at night when babies should sleep. He pushed it aside. It was crazy.

Alice went on. "I was going to kill the baby. Yes, I was. When you'd been gone only an hour on your trip I went to his room and put my hands about his neck, and I stood there, for a long time, thinking, afraid. Then I put the covers up over his face and turned him over on his face and pressed him down and left him that way and ran out of the room."

He tried to stop her.

"No, let me finish," she said, hoarsely, looking at the wall. "When I left his room I thought, it's simple. Babies die every day of smothering. No one'll ever know. But when I came back to see him dead, David, he was alive! Yes, alive, turned over on his back, alive and smiling and breathing. And I couldn't touch him again after that. I left him there and I didn't come back, not to feed him or look at him or do anything. Perhaps the cook tended to him. I don't know. All I know is that his crying kept me awake and I thought all through the night, and walked around the rooms, and now I'm sick." She was almost finished now. "The baby lies there and thinks of ways to kill me. Simple ways. Because he knows that I know so much about him. I have no love for him, there is no protection between us, there never will be again."

She was through. She collapsed inwards on herself and finally slept. David Leiber stood for a long while over her, not able to move. His brain was frozen in his head, not a cell of it stirred.

The next morning there was only one thing to do. He did it. He walked into Dr. Jeffers' office and told him the whole thing, and listened to Jeffers' tolerant replies:

"Let's take this thing slowly, son. It's quite natural for mothers to hate their children, sometimes. We have a label for it—ambivalence. The ability to hate, while loving. Lovers hate each other, frequently. Children detest their mothers——"

Leiber interrupted. "I never hated *my* mother."

"You won't admit it, naturally. People hate admitting hatred for loved ones."

"So Alice hates her baby."

"The best way to put it is that she has an obsession. She's gone a step further than plain, ordinary ambivalence. A Caesarian operation brought the child into the world, and almost took Alice out of it. She blames the child for her near-death and her pneumonia. She's projecting her troubles, blaming them on the handiest object she can use as a source of blame. We *all* do it. We stumble into a chair and curse the furniture, not our own clumsiness. We miss a golf-stroke and damn the turf or our club, or the make of ball. If our business fails we blame the gods, the weather, our luck. All I can tell you is what I told you before. Love her. Finest medicine in the world. Find little ways of showing your affection, give her security. Find ways of showing her how harmless and innocent the child is. Make her feel that the baby was *worth* the risk. After a while, she'll settle down, forget about death, and begin to love the child. If she doesn't come around in the next month or so, ask me and I'll recommend a good psychiatrist. Go on along now, and take that look off your face."

When summer came, things seemed to settle and become easy. Leiber worked, immersed himself in office detail, but never forgot to be thoughtful of his wife. She, in turn, took long walks, gained



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

strength, played an occasional light game of badminton. She rarely burst out emotionally any more. She seemed to have rid herself of her fears.

Except on one certain midnight when a sudden summer wind swept around the house, warm and swift, shaking the trees like so many shining tambourines. Alice awakened, trembling, and slid over into her husband's arms, and let him console her, and ask her what was wrong.

She said, "Something's here in the room, watching us."

He switched on the light. "Dreaming again," he said. "You're better, though. Haven't been scared for a long time."

She sighed as he clicked off the light again, and suddenly she slept. He held her, considering what a sweet, weird creature she was, for about half an hour.

He heard the bedroom door sway open a few inches.

There was nobody at the door. No reason for it to come open. The wind had died.

He waited. It seemed like an hour he lay silently, in the dark.

Then, far away, wailing like some small meteor dying in the vast inky gulf of space, the baby began to cry in his nursery.

It was a small, lonely sound in the middle of the stars and the dark and the breathing of this woman in his arms and the wind beginning to sweep through the trees again.

Leiber counted to fifty. The crying continued.

Finally, carefully disengaging Alice's grip, he slipped from bed, put on his slippers, robe, and tiptoed out of the room.

He'd go downstairs, he thought tiredly, and fix some warm milk, bring it up, and——

The blackness dropped out from under him. His foot slipped and plunged. Slipped on something soft. Plunged into nothingness.

He thrust his hands out, caught frantically at the railing. His body stopped falling. He held. He cursed.

The "something soft" that had caused his feet to slip rustled and thumped down a few steps and stopped. His head rang. His

heart hammered at the base of his throat, thick and shot with pain.

Why do careless people leave things strewn about a house? He groped carefully with his fingers for the object that had almost spilled him headlong down the stairs.

His hand froze, startled. His breath went in. His heart held one or two beats.

The thing he held in his hand was a toy. A large, cumbersome, patchwork doll he had bought as a joke, for——

*For the baby.*

Alice drove him to work the next day.

She slowed the car half-way down-town; pulled to the kerb and stopped it. Then she turned on the seat and looked at her husband.

"I want to go away on a vacation. I don't know if you can make it now, darling, but, if not, please let me go alone. We can get someone to take care of the baby, I'm sure. But I just have to get away. I thought I was growing out of this—this *feeling*. But I haven't. I can't stand being in the room with him. He looks up at me as if he hates me, too. I can't put my finger on it; all I know is I want to get away before something happens."

He got out on his side of the car, came around, motioned to her to move over, got in. "The only thing you're going to do is see a good psychiatrist. And if he suggests a vacation, well, okay. But this can't go on; my stomach's in knots all the time." He started the car. "I'll drive the rest of the way."

Her head was down, she was trying to keep back tears. She looked up when they reached his office-building. "All right. Make the appointment. I'll go talk to anyone you want, David."

He kissed her. "Now you're talking sense, lady. Think you can drive home okay?"

"Of course, silly."

"See you at supper, then. Drive carefully."

"Don't I always? 'Bye."

He stood on the kerb, watching her drive off, the wind taking



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

hold of her long dark, shining hair. Upstairs, a minute later, he phoned Jeffers, got an appointment arranged with a reliable neuropsychiatrist. That was *that*.

The day's work went uneasily. Things seemed to tangle and he kept seeing Alice all the time, mixed into everything he looked at. So much of her fear had come over into him. She actually had *him* convinced that the child was somewhat unnatural.

He dictated long, uninspired letters. He checked some shipments downstairs. Assistants had to be questioned, and kept going. At the end of the day he was all exhaustion, and nothing else. His head throbbed. He was very willing to go home.

On the way down in the elevator he wondered, what if I told Alice about that toy—the patchwork doll—I stumbled over on the stairs last night? Lord, wouldn't *that* send her off into hysterics! No, I won't ever tell her about that. After all, it was just one of those accidents.

Daylight lingered in the sky as he drove home in a taxi. In front of his Brentwood place he paid the driver and walked slowly up the cement walk, enjoying the light that was still in the sky and the trees. The white colonial front to the house looked unnaturally silent and uninhabited, and then, quietly, he remembered that this was Thursday, and the few hired help they were able to obtain from time to time were all gone for the day. It was cook's day off, too, and he and Alice would have to scavenge for themselves or eat on the Strip somewhere.

He took a deep breath of air. A bird sang behind the house. Traffic moved on the boulevard a block away. He turned the key in the door. The knob turned under his fingers, oiled, silent.

The door opened. He stepped in, put his hat on the chair with his brief-case, started to shrug out of his coat, when he looked up.

Late sunlight streamed down the stairwell from the window at the top of the house. Where the sunlight landed it took on the bright colour of the patchwork doll sprawled in a grotesque angle at the bottom of the stairs.

RAY BRADBURY

But he paid no attention to the patchwork doll.

He could only look, and not move, and look again at Alice.

Alice lay in a broken, grotesque, pallid gesturing and angling of her thin body. She was lying at the bottom of the stairs, like a crumpled doll who doesn't want to play any more, ever.

Alice was dead.

The house remained quiet, except for the sound of his heart. She was dead.

He held her head in his hands, he felt her fingers. He held her body. But she wouldn't live. She wouldn't even try to live. He said her name, out loud, many times, and he tried, once again, by holding her to him, to give her back some of the warmth she had lost, but that didn't help.

He stood up. He must have made a phone call. He didn't remember. He found himself, suddenly, upstairs. He opened the nursery door and walked inside and stared blankly at the crib. His stomach was sick. He couldn't see very well.

The baby's eyes were closed, but his face was red, moist with perspiration, as if he'd been crying long and hard.

"She's dead," said Leiber to the baby. "She's dead."

Then he started laughing low and soft and continuous for a long time until Dr. Jeffers walked in out of the night-time and slapped him again and again across his cheeks.

"Snap out of it! Pull yourself together, son!"

"She fell down the stairs, doctor. She tripped on a patchwork doll and fell. I almost slipped on it the other night, myself. And now——"

The doctor shook him.

"Doc, doc, doc," said Leiber, hazily. "Funny thing. Funny. I—I finally thought of a name for the baby."

The doctor said nothing.

Leiber put his head back in his trembling hands and spoke the words. "I'm going to have him christened next Sunday. Know what name I'm giving him? I'm—I'm going to call him—*Lucifer!*"

It was eleven at night. A lot of strange people had come and



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

gone through the house, taking the essential flame with them—Alice.

David Leiber sat across from the doctor in the library.

“Alice wasn’t crazy,” he said slowly. “She had good reason to fear the baby.”

Jeffers exhaled. “Now you’re following in her pattern. She blamed the child for her sickness, now *you* blame it for her death. She stumbled on a *toy*, remember that. You can’t blame the child.”

“You mean Lucifer?”

“Stop calling him Lucifer!”

Leiber shook his head. “Alice heard things at night. Things moving in the halls. As if someone spied on us. You want to know what those noises were, doctor? I’ll tell you. They were made by the baby! Yes, *my* son! Four months old, creeping around the dark halls at night, listening to us talk. Listening to *every word!*” He held to the sides of the chair. “And if I turned the lights on, a baby is a small object. It can conveniently hide behind furniture, a door, against a wall—below eye-level.”

“I want you to stop this!” demanded Jeffers.

“Let me say what I think or I’ll go crazy. When I went to Chicago, who was it kept Alice awake, tiring her, weakening her into pneumonia? The baby! And when Alice didn’t die, then he tried killing me. It was simple; leave a toy doll on the stairs, then cry in the night until your father rouses up, tired of listening to you cry, and goes downstairs to fetch you warm milk, and stumbles. A crude trick, but effective. It didn’t get me. But it killed Alice quite dead.”

David Leiber stopped long enough to light a cigarette. “I should have caught on. I’d turn on the lights in the middle of the night, many nights, and the baby’d be lying there, eyes wide. Most babies sleep constantly, all the time. Not *this* one. He stayed awake—thinking.”

“Babies don’t think,” countered Jeffers.

“He stayed awake doing whatever he *could* do with his brain, then. What in hell do we know about a baby’s brain? He had

every reason to hate Alice; she suspected him for what he was—certainly not a normal child. Something—different. What do you know of babies, doctor? The general knowledge, yes. You know, of course, how babies kill their mothers at birth. Why? In resentment at being forced into a lousy world like this one.”

Leiber leaned towards the doctor, tiredly. “It all ties up. Suppose that a few babies out of all the millions born are instantaneously able to move, see, hear, think, like many animals and insects can. Many insects are self-sufficient when born. In a few days most mammals and birds are adjusted. Little man-children take years to speak, faltering around on rubbery legs.

“But suppose one child in a million is—strange? Born perfectly aware, able to think, instinctively. Wouldn’t it be a perfect set-up, a perfect blind for anything the baby might want to do? He could pretend to be ordinary, weak, crying, ignorant. With just a little expenditure of energy he could crawl about a darkened house, listening. And how easy to place obstacles at the top of the stairs. How easy to cry all night and tire a mother into pneumonia. How easy, right at birth, to be so close to the mother that *a few deft manœuvres might cause peritonitis!*”

“For God’s sake!” Jeffers was on his feet. “That’s a repulsive thing to say!”

“It’s a repulsive thing I’m speaking of. How many mothers have died at the birth of their children? How many have suckled strange little improbabilities who cause death one way or another? Strange, red little creatures with brains that function in a scarlet darkness we can’t even guess at. Elemental little brains, as warm with racial memory and hatred and raw cruelty, with no more thought than self-preservation. And self-preservation in this case consisted of eliminating a mother who realised what a horror she had birthed. I ask you, doctor, what is there in the world more selfish than a baby? Nothing! Nothing is so self-centred, unsocial, selfish, nothing!”

Jeffers scowled and shook his head, helplessly, and shrugged.

Leiber dropped his cigarette down, weakly. “I’m not claiming any great strength for the child. Just enough to crawl around a



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

little, a few months ahead of schedule. Just enough to listen all the time. Just enough to cry late at night. That's enough, more than enough."

Jeffers tried ridicule. "Call it murder, then. And murder must have a motivation. Name a motivation for the child."

Leiber was ready with the answer. "What is more at peace, more dreamfully happy, content, at ease, at rest, fed, comforted, unbothered than an unborn child? Nothing. It floats in a sleepy dark effluvium of timeless wonder and warm nourishment and silence. All is an enclosed dream. Then, suddenly, it is asked to give up its berth, is forced to vacate, propelled out into a noisy, uncaring, selfish, swift and merciless world where it is asked to shift for itself, to hunt, to feed from the hunting, to seek after a vanishing love that once was its unquestionable right, to meet confusion instead of inner silence and conservative slumber! And the newborn *resents* it! Resents it with all the soft, small fibres of its miniature body. Resents the raw cold air, the huge spaces, the sudden departure from familiar things. And in the tiny filament of brain the only thing that the child knows is selfishness and hatred because the spell has been rudely shattered. And who is responsible for this disenchantment, this rude breakage of the spell? The mother. And so the new child has someone to hate, and hate with all the tiny fabric of its mind. The mother has cast it out, rejected it. And the father is no better, kill him, too! He's responsible in *his* way!"

Jeffers interrupted. "If what you say is true, then every woman in the world would have to look on her newborn as something to dread, something to wonder about, to shudder at."

"And why not? Hasn't the child a perfect alibi? He has a thousand years of accepted medical belief to protect him. By all natural accounts he is helpless, not responsible. The child is born hating. And things grow worse instead of better. At first the baby gets a certain amount of attention and mothering. But then, as time passes, things change. When very new, a baby has great power. Power to make parents do silly things when it cries or sneezes, jump when it makes a noise. As the years pass, the

baby feels even that little power slipping rapidly, forever away from it, never to return. Why shouldn't it grasp for all the power it can have, why shouldn't it jockey for position while it has all the advantages? In later years it would be too late to express its hatred. *Now* would be the time to strike. And later, this child, secretly aware, becoming more aware each and every day, would learn new things—about position, money, security. The child would see that through money it might eventually provide itself with a self-built womb of comforts, warmth and aloneness. And naturally, then, it might pay to destroy the father whose insurance policies for twenty thousand dollars are made out to the wife and baby. Again, I admit the baby isn't old enough for *that* motivation yet. Money is something beyond it. But *hatred* is not. The money angle might come later, not now. But it would come from the same desire, the desire to return to warm comfort and let-aloneness."

Leiber's voice was very soft, very low.

"My little boy baby, lying in his crib nights, his face moist and red and out of breath. From crying? No. From climbing tediously, achingly slow, out of his crib, from crawling long distances through darkened hallways. My little boy baby. I want to kill him."

The doctor handed him a water glass and some pills. "You're not killing anyone. You're going to sleep for twenty-four hours. Sleep'll change your mind. Take this."

Leiber drank down the pills and let himself be led upstairs to his bedroom, crying, and felt himself being put to bed.

The doctor said good night and left the house.

Leiber, alone, drifted towards sleep.

He heard a noise. "What's—what's that?" he demanded feebly.

Something moved in the hall.

David Leiber slept.

The next morning, Dr. Jeffers drove up to the Leiber house. It was a good morning, and he was here to tell Leiber to get out



## THE SMALL ASSASSIN

into the country for a rest. Leiber would still be asleep upstairs. Jeffers had given him enough sedative to knock him out for at least fifteen hours.

He rang the doorbell. No answer. The servants hadn't returned, it was too early. Jeffers tried the front door, found it open, stepped in. He put his medical kit on the nearest chair.

Something white moved out of view at the top of the stairs. Just a suggestion of a movement. Jeffers hardly noticed it.

The odour of gas was in the house.

Jeffers ran up the stairs, crashed into Leiber's bedroom.

Leiber lay on the bed, not moving, and the room billowed with gas, which hissed from a released jet at the base of the wall near the door. Jeffers twisted it off, then forced up all the windows, and ran back to Leiber's body.

The body was cold. It had been dead quite a few hours.

Coughing violently, the doctor hurried from the room, eyes watering. Leiber hadn't turned the gas on himself. He *couldn't* have. Those sedatives had knocked him out, he wouldn't have wakened until noon. It wasn't suicide. Or was there the faintest possibility?

Jeffers stood in the hall for five minutes. Then he walked to the door of the nursery. It was shut. He opened it. He walked inside and over to the crib.

The crib was empty.

He stood swaying over the crib for half a minute, then he said something to nobody in particular.

"The nursery door blew shut. You couldn't get back into your crib where it was safe. You didn't plan on the door blowing shut. A little thing like a slammed door can ruin the best of plans. I'll find you somewhere in the house, hiding, pretending to be something you are not." The doctor looked dazed. He put his hand to his head and smiled palely. "Now I'm talking like Alice and David talked. But I can't take any chances. I'm not sure of anything, but I can't take any chances."

He walked downstairs, opened his medical bag upon the chair, took something out of it and held it in his hands.

RAY BRADBURY

Something rustled down the hall. Something very small and very quiet. Jeffers turned rapidly.

“I had to operate to bring you into this world. Now I guess I can operate to take you out of it. . . .”

He took half a dozen quick, sure steps forward into the hall. He raised his hand into the sunlight.

“See, baby! Something bright—something pretty!”

A scalpel.



# The Frontier Guards

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H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

“What a charming little house!” said Brinton, as he was walking in from a round of golf at Ellesborough with Lander.

“Yes, from outside,” replied Lander.

“What’s the matter with the inside—Eozoic plumbing?”

“No; the ‘usual offices’ are neat, if not gaudy. Spengler would probably describe them as ‘contemporary with the death of Lincoln’, but it’s not that—it’s haunted.”

“Is it, by Jove!” said Brinton, gazing up at it. “Fancy such a dear little Queen Anne piece having such a nasty reputation. I see it’s unoccupied.”

“It usually is,” replied Lander.

“Tell me about it.”

“During dinner I will. But you seem to find something of interest about those windows on the second floor.” Brinton gazed up for a moment or two longer, and then started to walk back in silence beside his host.

In a few minutes they reached Lander’s cottage—it was rather more pretentious than that—an engaging two-storeyed structure added to and modernised from time to time, formerly known as “The Old Vicarage”, and rechristened “Laymer’s”. Black and white and creeper-lined, with a trim little garden of rose-trees and mellow turf, two fine limes, and a great yew, impenetrable and secret. This little garden melted into an arable expanse, and there was a lovely view over to some high Chiltern spurs. The whole place just suited Lander, who was—or, it might be more

accurate to say, wanted to be—a novelist: a commonplace and ill-advised ambition, but he had money of his own and could afford to wait.

James Brinton, his guest for a week and a very old friend, occupied himself with a picture gallery in Mayfair. A very small gallery—one rather small room, to be exact—but he had admirable taste and made it pay.

Two hours later they sat down to dinner. "Now then," said Brinton, as Mrs. Dunkley brought in the soup, "tell me about that house."

"Well," replied Lander, "I have had, as you know, much more experience of such places than most people, and I consider Pailton the worst or the best specimen I have heard or read of or experienced. For one thing, it is a 'killer'. The majority of haunted houses are harmless, the peculiar energy they have absorbed and radiate forth is not hostile to life. But in others the radiation is malignant and fatal. Pailton has been rented five times in the last twelve years; in each case the tenancy has been marked by a violent death within its walls. For my part, I have no two opinions concerning the morality of letting it at all. It should be razed to the ground."

"How long do its occupants stick it out as a rule?"

"Six weeks is the record, and that was made by some people called Pendexter. That was three years ago. I knew Pendexter *père*, and he was a courageous and determined person. His daughter was hurled down the stairs one night and killed, and I shall never forget the mingled fury and grief with which he told me about it. Previous to that he had detected eighteen different examples of psychic action—appearances and sounds—several definitely malignant. The family had not enjoyed one single day of freedom from abnormal phenomena."

"How long since it was last occupied?" asked Brinton.

"It has been empty for a year, and I am inclined to think it will remain so. Anyone who comes down to look at it is given a pretty straight tip by one or other of us to keep away."

"Does it affect you violently?"



## THE FRONTIER GUARDS

"I have never set foot in it."

"What? You, of all people!"

"My dear Jim, just for that very reason. When I first discovered I was psychic I felt flattered and anxious to experience all I could. I soon changed my mind. I found I experienced quite enough without any need for *making* opportunities. I do to this day. Several times I have had a visitor in the study here after dinner, an uninvited guest. And it has always been so. I have many times heard and seen things which could not be explained in places with perfectly clean bills of psychic health. And one never gets quite used to it. Terror may pass, but some distress of mind is invariable. Any person gifted or afflicted like myself will tell you the same. It seems to me sometimes as if I actually assist in evoking and materialising these appearances, that I help to establish a connection between them and the place I inhabit, that I am a most unpleasant kind of lightning conductor."

"Is there any possible explanation for that?"

"Well, I have formed one, but it would take rather a long time to explain, and may be quite fallacious. Anyhow, there has never been any need for me to visit such places as Pailton, and I keep away from them if I can."

"Would you very much object to going in for a minute or two?"

"Why?"

"Well, I have been bothered all my life about this business of ghosts. I have never seen one; in a sense I 'don't believe in them', yet I am convinced you have known many. It is a maddening dualism of mind. I feel if I could just once come in contact with something of the kind I should feel a sense of enormous relief."

"And you'd like me to conduct you over Pailton?"

"Not if it really upset you."

"It would be at your own risk," said Lander, smiling.

"I'll risk it!"

"You mustn't imagine that you can go into a disturbed spot such as this and expect to see about ten ghosts in as many

minutes. Even in the case of such a busy hive as Pailton there are many quiet periods, and some people simply cannot 'see ghosts'. The odds are very much against your desire being granted, though, if you *are* psychic, the atmosphere of the place would affect you at once."

"How?"

"Well, you've often heard of people who know by some obscure but infallible instinct that there's a cat in the room. Just so. However, I'll certainly give you the chance. It won't seriously disturb me. I can get the key in the morning from the woman who looks after it, though I need hardly say she doesn't sleep there. There is no need for a caretaker. It was broken into once, but the burglar was found dead in the dining-room, and since then the crooks have given it a wide berth."

"It really is dangerous, then?"

"Beginning to feel a bit prudent?"

"No, I shall feel safe with you."

"Very well, then. After coming back from golf we'll pay it a visit. It will be dark by five, and we'll make the excursion about six. The chances of gratifying your curiosity will be better after dark. I'd better tell you something else. I never quite know how these places are going to affect me. Before now, I have gone off into a kind of trance and been decidedly weird, my dear Jim. My sense of time and space becomes distorted, though for your assurance I may say," he added smiling, "I am never dangerous when in this condition. Furthermore, you must be prepared to make acquaintance with a mode of existence in which the ordinary laws of existence which you have always known abdicate themselves. Bierce called his famous book of ghost stories, *Can Such Things Be?* Assuredly they can. Now I'm sounding pompous and pontifical, but some such warning is necessary. When I touch that front door to-morrow I may become in a sense a stranger to you; once inside we shall cross a frontier into a region with its own laws of time and space, and where the seemingly impossible can happen. . . . Do you understand what I mean and still want to go?"



## THE FRONTIER GUARDS

"Yes," replied Brinton, "to all your questions."

"Very well then," said Lander, "I will now get out the chessmen and discover a complete answer to Reti's opening which you sprang on me last night; so you shall have the white pieces."

November 21st was a lazy, drowsy, cloudless day, starting with a sharp ground frost which, thawing unresistingly as the sun climbed, made the tees at Ellesborough like tiny slides. In consequence, neither Brinton nor Lander played very good golf. This upset Brinton not at all, for he was thinking much more of that which was beginning to impress him as a possible ordeal, the crossing of the threshold of Pailton a few hours later. As they finished their second round a mist, spreading like a gigantic spider's web, was beginning to raise the level of the Buckinghamshire fields. As they walked homewards it climbed with them, keeping pace with them like a dog; sometimes hurrying ahead, then dropping back, but always with them.

It was exactly five o'clock as they reached Laymer's. Tea was ready. "Do you still want to go, Jim?" asked Lander abruptly.

"Sure, Bo!" replied Brinton lightly.

"Here's the key," said Lander, smiling, "the Open Sesame to the Chamber of Horrors. The electric light is turned off, so all the light we shall have will be produced by my torch. One last word of advice—if you want to get the best chance of a thrill, try to keep your mind quite empty—don't talk as I personally conduct this tour. Concentrate on *not* concentrating."

"I understand what you mean," said Brinton.

"Well, then, let's get a move on," said Lander.

An idea suddenly occurred to Brinton. "How will you be able to show me over it if you've never been inside it?"

"You needn't worry about that," replied Lander.

The fog was thick by now and they wavered slightly as they groped their way down the lane, compressed by high hedges which led to Pailton. When they reached it, Brinton's eyes turned up to observe the windows on the second floor. And then Lander stepped forward and placed the key in the lock.

## H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

As the door swung open the fog, which seemed to have been crouching at his heels, leapt forward and entered with him and inundated the passage down which he moved. The moment he was inside, something advanced to meet him. He opened a door on the left of the passage and flashed his torch round it. The fog was in there, too. Jim, he could feel, was at his elbow.

"This is where they found the burglar—it's the dining-room."

His voice was not quite under control. "Quite a pleasant room, smells a bit frowsty." The little beam wandered from chair to desk, settling for a moment here and there. Then he shut the door and stepped along the passage till the little beam revealed a flight of stairs which he began to climb. He still heard Brinton's steps coming up behind him. Up on the first floor he opened another door. "This is the drawing-room," he said. "The Proctors' cook was found dead here in 1921."

Round swung the tiny beam, fastening on chairs, tables, desks, curtains. He shut the door and began to climb another flight of stairs. He could hear Jim's feet pattering up behind him. On the second floor he opened still another door. "This, my dear Jim, is the nasty one; it was from here Amy Pendexter fell and broke her neck."

His voice had risen slightly, and he was speaking quickly. Once again he flashed his torch over chairs, tables, curtains, and ahead.

"Well, Jim, do you get any reaction? Do you? You can speak now." As there was no answer, he turned, and swung the beam of his torch on to the person just behind him. But it wasn't Brinton who was standing at his elbow. . . .

"What's the matter, Willie?" asked Brinton, "can't you find the keyhole?" The figure in front of him remained motionless.

"Can't you find the keyhole?" asked Brinton more urgently.

As the figure still remained motionless, Jim Brinton lit a match and peered forward. . . . And then he reeled back.

"Who, in God's name, are you?" he cried.



# The Cat Jumps

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ELIZABETH BOWEN

After the Bentley murder, Rose Hill stood empty two years. Lawns mounted to meadows, white paint peeled from the balconies; the sun, looking more constantly, less fearfully in than sightseers' eyes through the naked windows, bleached the floral wallpapers. The week after the execution, Harold Bentley's legatees had placed the house on the books of the principal agents, London and local. But though sunny, modern and convenient, though so delightfully situated over the Thames valley (above flood level), within easy reach of a golf course, Rose Hill, while frequently viewed, remained unpurchased. Dreadful associations apart, the privacy of the place had been violated; with its terraced garden, lily-pond, and pergola cheerfully rose-encrusted the public had been made too familiar. On the domestic scene, too many eyes had burnt the impress of their horror. Moreover, that pearly bathroom, bedroom with wide outlook over a loop of the Thames . . . "The Rose Hill Horror": headlines flashed up at the very sound of the name. "Oh *no*, dear!" many wives had exclaimed, drawing their husbands from the gate. "Come away!" they urged, crumpling the agent's order to view as though the house were advancing on them. And husbands came away—with a backward glance at the garage. Funny to think; a chap who was hanged had kept his car there.

The Harold Wrights, however, were not deterred. They had light, bright, shadowless, thoroughly disinfected minds. They believed that they disbelieved in most things but were unprejudiced; they enjoyed frank discussions. They dreaded

## ELIZABETH BOWEN

nothing but inhibitions: they had no inhibitions. They were pious agnostics, earnest for social reform; they explained everything to their children and were annoyed to find their children could not sleep at nights because they thought there was a complex under the bed. They knew all crime to be pathological, and read their murders only in scientific books. They had Vita Glass put into all their windows. No family, in fact, could have been more unlike the mistaken Harold Bentleys.

Rose Hill, from the first glance, suited the Wrights admirably. They were in search of a cheerful week-end house with a nice atmosphere where their friends could join them for frank discussions, and their own and their friends' children "run wild" during the summer months. Harold Wright, who had a good head, got the agent to knock six hundred off the quoted price of the house. "That unfortunate affair," he murmured. Jocelyn commended his inspiration. Otherwise, they did not give the Bentleys another thought.

The Wrights had the floral wallpapers all stripped off and the walls cream-washed; they removed some disagreeably thick pink shades from the electricity, and had the paint renewed inside and out. (The front of the house was bracketed over with balconies, like an overmantel.) Their bedroom mantelpiece, stained by the late Mrs. Bentley's cosmetics, had to be scrubbed with chemicals. Also, they had removed from the rock-garden Mrs. Bentley's little dog's memorial tablet, with a quotation on it from "Indian Love Lyrics". Jocelyn Wright, looking into the unfortunate bath, *the* bath, so square and opulent with its surround of nacreous tiles, said, laughing lightly, she supposed anyone *else* would have had that bath changed. "Not that that would be possible," she added; "the bath's built in . . . I've always wanted a built-in bath."

Harold and Jocelyn turned from the bath to look down at the cheerful river shimmering under a spring haze. All the way down the slope cherry trees were in blossom. Life should be simplified for the Wrights—they were fortunate in their mentality.

After an experimentary week-end, without guests or children,



## THE CAT JUMPS

only one thing troubled them: a resolute stuffiness, upstairs and down—due, presumably, to the house's having been so long shut up—a smell of unsavoury habitation, of rich cigarette smoke stale in the folds of unaired curtains, of scent spilled on unbrushed carpets; an alcoholic smell—persistent in their perhaps too sensitive nostrils after days of airing, doors and windows open, in rooms drenched thoroughly with sun and wind. They told each other it came from the parquet—they didn't like it, somehow. They had the parquet taken up—at great expense—and put down plain oak floors.

In their practical way, the Wrights now set out to expel, live out, live down, almost (had the word had place in their vocabulary) to "lay" the Bentleys. Deferred by trouble over the parquet, their occupation of Rose Hill (which should have dated from mid-April) did not begin till the end of May. Throughout a week, Jocelyn had motored from town daily, so that the final installation of themselves and the children was able to coincide with their first week-end party—they asked down five of their friends to warm the house.

That first Friday, everything was auspicious; afternoon sky blue as the garden irises; later, a full moon pendent over the river; a night so warm that, after midnight, their enlightened friends, in pyjamas, could run on the blanched lawns in a state of high though rational excitement. Jane, John and Janet, their admirably spaced-out children, kept awake by the moonlight, hailed their elders out of the nursery skylight. Jocelyn waved to them: they never had been repressed.

The girl Muriel Barker was found looking up the terraces at the house, a shade doubtfully. "You know," she said, "I do rather wonder they don't feel . . . *sometimes* . . . You know what I mean?"

"No," replied her companion, a young scientist.

Muriel sighed. "No one would mind if it had been just a short, sharp shooting. But it was so . . . prolonged. It went on all over the house. Do you remember?" she said timidly.



ELIZABETH BOWEN

"No," replied Mr. Cartaret, "it didn't interest me."

"Oh, nor me either!" agreed Muriel quickly, but added: "How he must have hated her! . . ."

The scientist, sleepy, yawned frankly and referred her to Krafft-Ebing. But Muriel went to bed with *Alice in Wonderland*; she went to sleep with the lights on. She was not, as Jocelyn realized later, the sort of girl to have asked at all.

Next morning was overcast; in the afternoon it rained, suddenly and heavily, interrupting, for some, tennis, for others a pleasant discussion, in a punt, on marriage under the Soviet. Defeated, they all rushed in. Jocelyn went round from room to room, shutting tightly the rain-lashed casements along the front of the house: these continued to rattle; the balconies creaked. An early dusk set in; an oppressive, almost visible moisture, up from the darkening river, pressed on the panes like a presence and slid through the house. The party gathered in the library, round an expansive but thinly burning fire. Harold circulated photographs of modern architecture; they discussed these tendencies. Then Mrs. Monkhouse, sniffing, exclaimed: "Who uses 'Trèfle Incarnat'?"

"Now *whoever* would——" her hostess began scornfully. Then from the hall came a howl, a scuffle, a thin shriek. They too sat still; in the dusky library Mr. Cartaret laughed out loud. Harold Wright, indignantly throwing open the door, revealed Jane and Jacob rolling at the foot of the stairs biting each other, their faces dark with uninhibited passion. Bumping alternate heads against the foot of the banisters, they shrieked in concord.

"Extraordinary," said Harold; "they've never done that before. They have always understood each other so well."

"I wouldn't do that," advised Jocelyn, raising her voice slightly; "you'll hurt your teeth. Other teeth won't grow at once, you know."

"You should let them find that out for themselves," disapproved Edward Cartaret, taking up the *New Statesman*. Harold, in perplexity, shut the door on his children, who soon stunned each other to silence.



## THE CAT JUMPS

Meanwhile, Sara and Talbot Monkhouse, Muriel Barker and Theodora Smith had drawn together over the fire in a tight little knot. Their voices twanged with excitement. By that shock just now, something seemed to have been released. Even Cartaret gave them half his attention. They were discussing *crime passionnel*.

"Of course, if that's what they really *want* to discuss . . ." thought Jocelyn. But it did seem unfortunate. Partly from an innocent desire to annoy her visitors, partly because the room felt awful—you would have thought fifty people had been there for a week—she went across and opened one of the windows, admitting a pounce of damp wind. They all turned, startled, to hear rain crash on the lead of an upstairs balcony. Muriel's voice was left in forlorn solo: "Dragged herself . . . whining 'Harold' . . ."

Harold Wright looked remarkably self-conscious. Jocelyn said brightly, "Whatever *are* you talking about?" But unfortunately Harold, on almost the same breath, suggested: "Let's leave that family alone, shall we?" Their friends all felt they might not be asked again. Though they did feel, plaintively, that they had been being natural. However, they disowned Muriel, who, getting up abruptly, said she thought she'd like to go for a walk in the rain before dinner. Nobody accompanied her.

Later, overtaking Mrs. Monkhouse on the stairs, Muriel confided: absolutely, she could not stand Edward Cartaret. She could hardly bear to be in the room with him. He seemed so . . . cruel. Cold-blooded? No, she meant cruel. Sara Monkhouse, going into Jocelyn's room for a chat (at her entrance Jocelyn started violently) told Jocelyn that Muriel could not stand Edward, could hardly bear to be in a room with him. "Pity," said Jocelyn, "I had thought they might do for each other." Jocelyn and Sara agreed that Muriel was unrealized: what she ought to have was a baby. But when Sara, dressing, told Talbot Monkhouse that Muriel could not stand Edward, and Talbot said Muriel was unrealized, Sara was furious. The Monkhouses, who never did quarrel, quarrelled bitterly and were late for dinner. They would have been later if the meal itself had not



## ELIZABETH BOWEN

been delayed by an outburst of sex-antagonism between the nice Jacksons, a couple imported from London to run the house. Mrs. Jackson, putting everything in the oven, had locked herself into her room.

"Curious," said Harold, "the Jacksons' relations to each other always seemed so modern. They have the most intelligent discussions."

Theodora said she had been re-reading Shakespeare—this brought them point-blank up against Othello. Harold, with titanic force, wrenched round the conversation to Relativity: about this no one seemed to have anything to say but Edward Cartaret. And Muriel, who by some mischance had again been placed beside him, sat deathly, turning down her dark-rimmed eyes. In fact, on the intelligent, sharp-featured faces all round the table, something, perhaps simply a clearness, seemed to be lacking, as though these were wax faces for one fatal instant exposed to a furnace. Voices came out from some dark interiority; in each conversational interchange a mutual vote of no confidence was implicit. You would have said that each personality had been attacked by some kind of decomposition.

"No moon to-night," complained Sara Monkhouse. Never mind, they would have a cosy evening, they would play paper games, Jocelyn promised.

"If you can see," said Harold. "Something seems to be going wrong with the light."

Did Harold think so? They had all noticed the light seemed to be losing quality, as though a film, smoke-like, were creeping over the bulbs. The light, thinning, darkening, seemed to contract round each lamp into a blurred aura. They had noticed, but, each with a proper dread of his own subjectivity, had not spoken.

"Funny stuff," Harold said, "electricity."

Mr. Cartaret could not agree with him.

Though it was late, though they yawned and would not play paper games, they were reluctant to go to bed. You would have supposed a delightful evening. Jocelyn was not gratified.



## THE CAT JUMPS

The library stools, rugs and divans were strewn with Krafft-Ebing, Freud, Forel, Weiniger and the heterosexual volume of Havelock Ellis. (Harold had thought it right to install his reference library; his friends hated to discuss without basis.) The volumes were pressed open with paper-knives and small pieces of modern statuary; stooping from one to another, purposeful as a bee, Edward Cartaret read extracts aloud to Harold, to Talbot Monkhouse and to Theodora Smith, who stitched *gros point* with resolution. At the far end of the library, under a sallow drip from a group of electric candles, Mrs. Monkhouse and Miss Barker shared an ottoman, spines pressed rigid against the wall. Tensely, one spoke, one listened.

"And these," thought Jocelyn, leaning back with her eyes shut between the two groups, "are friends I liked to have in my life. Pellucid, sane . . ."

It was remarkable how much Muriel knew. Sara, very much shocked, edged up till their thighs touched. You would have thought the Harold Bentleys had been Muriel's relatives. Surely, Sara attempted, in one's large, bright world one did not think of these things? Practically, they did not exist! Surely Muriel should not. . . . But Muriel looked at her strangely.

"Did you know," she said, "that one of Mrs. Bentley's hands was found in the library?"

Sara, smiling a little awkwardly, licked her lip. "Oh," she said.

"But the fingers were in the dining-room. He began there."

"Why isn't he in Broadmoor?"

"That defence failed. He didn't really subscribe to it. He said having done what he wanted was worth anything."

"Oh!"

"Yes, he was nearly lynched. . . . She dragged herself upstairs. She couldn't lock any doors—naturally. One maid, her maid, got shut into the house with them; he'd sent all the others away. For a long time everything seemed so quiet: the maid crept out and saw Harold Bentley sitting half-way upstairs, finishing a cigarette. All the lights were full on. He nodded to her and dropped the cigarette through the banisters. Then she saw the . . .



state of the hall. He went upstairs after Mrs. Bentley, saying: 'Lucinda!' He looked into room after room, whistling, then he said, 'Here we are,' and shut a door after him.

"The maid fainted. When she came to it was still going on, upstairs. . . . Harold Bentley had locked all the garden doors, there were locks even on the french windows. The maid couldn't get out. Everything she touched was . . . sticky. At last she broke a pane and got through. As she ran down the garden—the lights were on all over the house—she saw Harold Bentley moving about in the bathroom. She fell right over the edge of a terrace and one of the tradesmen picked her up next day.

"Doesn't it seem odd, Sara, to think of Jocelyn in that bath?"

Finishing her recital, Muriel turned on Sara an ecstatic and brooding look that made her almost beautiful. Sara fumbled with a cigarette; match after match failed her. "Muriel, you should see a specialist."

Muriel held out her hand for a cigarette. "He put her heart in her hat-box. He said it belonged there."

"You had no right to come here. It was most unfair on Jocelyn. Most . . . indelicate."

Muriel, to whom the word was, properly, unfamiliar, eyed incredulously Sara's lips.

"How dared you come?"

"I thought I might like it. I thought I ought to fulfil myself. I'd never had any experience of these things."

"*Muriel! . . .*"

"Besides, I wanted to meet Edward Cartaret. Several people said we were made for each other. Now, of course, I shall never marry. Look what comes of it . . . I must say, Sara, I wouldn't be you or Jocelyn. Shut up all night with a man all alone—I don't know how you dare sleep. I've arranged to sleep with Theodora, and we shall barricade the door. I noticed something about Edward Cartaret the moment I arrived; a kind of insane glitter. He is utterly pathological. He's got instruments in his room, in that black bag. Yes, I looked. Did you notice the way



## THE CAT JUMPS

he went on and on about cutting up that cat, and the way Talbot and Harold listened?"

Sara, looking furtively round the room, saw Mr. Cartaret making passes over the head of Theodora Smith with a paper-knife. Both appeared to laugh heartily, but in silence.

"Here we are," said Harold, showing his teeth, smiling.

He stood over Muriel with a siphon in one hand, glass in the other.

At this point Jocelyn, rising, said she, for one, intended to go to bed.

Jocelyn's bedroom curtains swelled a little over the noisy window. The room was stuffy and—insupportable, so that she did not know where to turn. The house, fingered outwardly by the wind that dragged unceasingly past the walls, was, within, a solid silence: silence heavy as flesh. Jocelyn dropped her wrap to the floor, then watched how its feathered edges crept a little—a draught came in under her bathroom door.

Jocelyn turned in despair and hostility from the strained, pale woman looking at her from her oblong glass. She said aloud: "There is no fear," then within herself heard this taken up: "But the death fear, that one is not there to relate! If the spirit, dismembered in agony, dies before the body! If the spirit in the whole knowledge of its dissolution, drags from chamber to chamber, drops from plane to plane of awareness (as from knife to knife down an oubliette) shedding, receiving agony! Till, long afterwards, death with its little pain is established in the indifferent body." There was no comfort: death (now at every turn and instant claiming her) was in its every possible manifestation violent death: ultimately she was to be given up to terror.

Undressing, shocked by the iteration of her reflected movements, she flung a towel over the glass. With what desperate eyes of appeal, at Sara's door, she and Sara had looked at each other, clung with their looks—and parted. She could have sworn she heard Sara's bolt slide softly to. But what then, subse-

quently, of Talbot? And what—she eyed her own bolt, so bright (and for the late Mrs. Bentley so ineffective)—what of Harold?

“It’s atavistic!” she said aloud in the dark-lit room, and, kicking her slippers away, got into bed. She took *Erewhon* from the rack but lay rigid, listening. As though snatched by a movement, the towel slipped from the mirror beyond her bed-end. She faced the two eyes of an animal in extremity, eyes black, mindless. The clock struck two: she had been waiting an hour.

On the floor, her feathered wrap shivered again all over. She heard the other door of the bathroom very stealthily open, then shut. Harold moved in softly, heavily, knocked against the side of the bath and stood still. He was quietly whistling.

“Why didn’t I understand? He must always have hated me. It’s to-night he’s been waiting for . . . *He wanted this house*. His look, as we went upstairs . . . ”

She shrieked: “Harold!”

Harold, so softly whistling, remained behind the imperturbable door, remained quite still. . . . “He’s *listening* for me. . . .” One pin-point of hope at the tunnel end: to get to Sara, to Theodora, to Muriel. Unmasked, incautious, with a long tearing sound of displaced air, Jocelyn leapt from bed to the door.

But her door had been locked from the outside.

With a strange rueful smile, like an actress, Jocelyn, skirting the foot of the two beds, approached the door of the bathroom. “At least I have still . . . my feet.” For, for some time, the heavy body of Mrs. Bentley, tenacious of life, had been dragging itself from room to room. “*Harold!*” she said to the silence, face close to the door.

The door opened on Harold, looking more dreadfully at her than she had imagined. With a quick, vague movement he roused himself from his meditation. Therein he had assumed the entire burden of Harold Bentley. Forces he did not know of assembling darkly, he had faced for untold ages the imperturbable door to his wife’s room. She would be there, densely, smotheringly there. She lay like a great cat, always, over the mouth of his life.



## THE CAT JUMPS

The Harolds, superimposed on each other, stood searching the bedroom strangely. Taking a step forward, shutting the door behind him:

“Here we are,” said Harold.

Jocelyn went down heavily. Harold watched.

Harold Wright was appalled. Jocelyn had fainted: Jocelyn never had fainted before. He shook, he fanned, he applied restoratives. His perplexed thoughts fled to Sara—oh, Sara certainly. “Hi,” he cried, “Sara!” and successively fled from each to each of the locked passage doors. There was no way out.

Across the passage, a door throbbed to the maniac drumming of Sara Monkhouse. She had been locked in. For Talbot, agonized with solicitude, it was equally impossible to emerge from his dressing-room. Farther down the passage, Edward Cartaret, interested by this nocturnal manifestation, wrenched and rattled his door handle in vain.

Muriel, on her way through the house to Theodora’s bedroom, had turned all the keys on the outside, impartially. She did not know which door was Edward Cartaret’s. Muriel was a woman who took no chances.

21.6.1967  
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# They Bite

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ANTHONY BOUCHER

There was no path, only the almost vertical ascent. Crumbled rock for a few yards, with the roots of sage finding their scanty life in the dry soil. Then jagged outcroppings of crude crags, sometimes with accidental footholds, sometimes with overhanging and untrustworthy branches of greasewood, sometimes with no aid to climbing but the leverage of your muscles and the ingenuity of your balance.

The sage was as drably green as the rock was drably brown. The only colour was the occasional rosy spikes of a barrel cactus.

Hugh Tallant swung himself up on to the last pinnacle. It had a deliberate, shaped look about it—a petrified fortress of Lilliputians, a Gibraltar of pygmies. Tallant perched on its battlements and unslung his field-glasses.

The desert valley spread below him. The tiny cluster of buildings that was Oasis, the exiguous cluster of palms that gave name to the town and shelter to his own tent and to the shack he was building, the dead-ended highway leading straightforwardly to nothing, the oiled roads diagramming the vacant blocks of an optimistic sub-division.

Tallant saw none of these. His glasses were fixed beyond the oasis and the town of Oasis on the dry lake. The gliders were clear and vivid to him, and the uniformed men busy with them were as sharply and minutely visible as a nest of ants under glass. The training school was more than usually active. One glider in particular, strange to Tallant, seemed the focus of attention.



## THEY BITE

Men would come and examine it and glance back at the older models in comparison.

Only the corner of Tallant's left eye was not preoccupied with the new glider. In that corner something moved, something little and thin and brown as the earth. Too large for a rabbit, much too small for a man. It darted across that corner of vision, and Tallant found gliders oddly hard to concentrate on.

He set down the bifocals and deliberately looked about him. His pinnacle surveyed the narrow, flat area of the crest. Nothing stirred. Nothing stood out against the sage rock but one barrel of rosy spikes. He took up the glasses again and resumed his observations. When he was done, he methodically entered the results in the little black notebook.

His hand was still white. The desert is cold and often sunless in winter. But it was a firm hand, and as well trained as his eyes, fully capable of recording faithfully the designs and dimensions which they had registered so accurately.

Once his hand slipped, and he had to erase and re-draw, leaving a smudge that displeased him. The lean, brown thing had slipped across the edge of his vision again. Going toward the east edge, he would swear, where that set of rocks jutted like the spines on the back of a stegosaur.

Only when his notes were completed did he yield to curiosity, and even then with cynical self-reproach. He was physically tired, for him an unusual state, from this daily climbing and from clearing the ground for his shack-to-be. The eye muscles play odd nervous tricks. There could be nothing behind the stegosaur's armour.

There was nothing. Nothing alive and moving. Only the torn and half-plucked carcass of a bird, which looked as though it had been gnawed by some small animal.

It was halfway down the hill—hill in Western terminology, though anywhere east of the Rockies it would have been considered a sizeable mountain—that Tallant again had a glimpse of a moving figure.

But this was no trick of a nervous eye. It was not little nor thin

ANTHONY BOUCHER

nor brown. It was tall and broad and wore a loud red-and-black lumberjacket. It bellowed "Tallant!" in a cheerful and lusty voice.

Tallant drew near the man and said "Hello." He paused and added, "Your advantage, I think."

The man grinned broadly. "Don't know me? Well, I daresay ten years is a long time, and the California desert ain't exactly the Chinese rice fields. How's stuff? Still loaded down with Secrets for Sale?"

Tallant tried desperately not to react to that shot, but he stiffened a little. "Sorry. The prospector get-up had me fooled. Good to see you again, Morgan."

The man's eyes had narrowed. "Just having my little joke," he smiled. "Of course you wouldn't have no serious reason for mountain-climbing around a glider school, now would you? And you'd kind of need field-glasses to keep an eye on the pretty birdies."

"I'm out here for my health." Tallant's voice sounded unnatural even to himself.

"Sure, sure. You were always in it for your health. And come to think of it, my own health ain't been none too good lately. I've got me a little cabin way to hell-and-gone around here, and I do me a little prospecting now and then. And somehow it just strikes me, Tallant, like maybe I hit a pretty good lode today."

"Nonsense, old man. You can see——"

"I'd sure hate to tell any of them Army men out at the field some of the stories I know about China and the kind of men I used to know out there. Wouldn't cotton to them stories a bit, the Army wouldn't. But if I was to have a drink too many and get talkative-like——"

"Tell you what," Tallant suggested brusquely. "It's getting near sunset now, and my tent's chilly for evening visits. But drop around in the morning and we'll talk over old times. Is rum still your tippie?"

"Sure is. Kind of expensive now, you understand——"

"I'll lay some in. You can find the place easily—over by the



## THEY BITE

oasis. And we . . . we might be able to talk about your prospecting, too."

Tallant's thin lips were set firm as he walked away.

The bartender opened a bottle of beer and plunked it on the damp-circled counter. "That'll be twenty cents," he said, then added as an afterthought, "Want a glass? Sometimes tourists do."

Tallant looked at the others sitting at the counter—the red-eyed and unshaven old man, the flight sergeant unhappily drinking a Coke—it was after Army hours for beer—the young man with the long, dirty trench coat and the pipe and the new-looking brown beard—and saw no glasses. "I guess I won't be a tourist," he decided.

This was the first time Tallant had had a chance to visit the Desert Sport Spot. It was as well to be seen around in a community. Otherwise people begin to wonder and say, "Who is that man out by the oasis? Why don't you ever see him any place?"

The Sport Spot was quiet that night. The four of them at the counter, two Army boys shooting pool, and a half-dozen of the local men gathered about a round poker table, soberly and wordlessly cleaning a construction worker whose mind seemed more on his beer than on his cards.

"You just passing through?" the bartender asked sociably.

Tallant shook his head. "I'm moving in. When the Army turned me down for my lungs I decided I better do something about it. Heard so much about your climate here I thought I might as well try it."

"Sure thing," the bartender nodded. "You take up until they started this glider school, just about every other guy you meet in the desert is here for his health. Me, I had sinus, and look at me now. It's the air."

Tallant breathed the atmosphere of smoke and beer suds, but did not smile. "I'm looking forward to miracles."

"You'll get 'em. Whereabouts you staying?"

ANTHONY BOUCHER

"Over that way a bit. The agent called it 'the old Carker place'."

Tallant felt the curious listening silence and frowned. The bartender had started to speak and then thought better of it. The young man with the beard looked at him oddly. The old man fixed him with red and watery eyes that had a faded glint of pity in them. For a moment Tallant felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night air of the desert.

The old man drank his beer in quick gulps, and frowned as though trying to formulate a sentence. At last he wiped beer from his bristly lips and said, "You wasn't aiming to stay in the adobe, was you?"

"No. It's pretty much gone to pieces. Easier to rig me up a little shack than try to make the adobe liveable. Meanwhile, I've got a tent."

"That's all right, then, mebbe. But mind you don't go poking around that there adobe."

"I don't think I'm apt to. But why not? Want another beer?"

The old man shook his head reluctantly and slid from his stool to the ground. "No thanks. I don't rightly know as I——"

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Thanks all the same." He turned and shuffled to the door.

Tallant smiled. "But why should I stay clear of the adobe?" he called after him.

The old man mumbled.

"What?"

"They bite," said the old man, and went out shivering into the night.

The bartender was back at his post. "I'm glad he didn't take that beer you offered him," he said. "Along about this time in the evening I have to stop serving him. For once he had the sense to quit."

Tallant pushed his own empty bottle forward. "I hope I didn't frighten him away?"



## THEY BITE

"Frighten? Well, mister, I think maybe that's just what you did do. He didn't want beer that sort of came, like you might say, from the old Carker place. Some of the old-timers here, they're funny that way."

Tallant grinned. "Is it haunted?"

"Not what you'd call haunted, no. No ghosts there that I ever heard of." He wiped the counter with a cloth, and seemed to wipe the subject away with it.

The flight sergeant pushed his Coke bottle away, hunted in his pocket for nickels, and went over to the pinball machine. The young man with the beard slid on to his vacant stool. "Hope old Jake didn't worry you," he said.

Tallant laughed. "I suppose every town has its deserted homestead with a grisly tradition. But this sounds a little different. No ghosts, and they bite. Do you know anything about it?"

"A little," the young man said seriously. "A little. Just enough to——"

Tallant was curious. "Have one on me and tell me about it."

The flight sergeant swore bitterly at the machine.

Beer gurgled through the beard. "You see," the young man began, "the desert's so big you can't be alone in it. Ever notice that? It's all empty and there's nothing in sight, but there's always something moving over there where you can't quite see it. It's something very dry and thin and brown, only when you look around it isn't there. Ever see it?"

"Optical fatigue——" Tallant began.

"Sure. I know. Every man to his own legend. There isn't a tribe of Indians hasn't got some way of accounting for it. You've heard of the Watchers? And the twentieth-century white man comes along, and it's optical fatigue. Only in the nineteenth century things weren't quite the same, and there were the Carkers."

"You've got a special localized legend?"

"Call it that. You glimpse things out of the corner of your mind, same like you glimpse lean, dry things out of the corner



## ANTHONY BOUCHER

of your eye. You encase 'em in solid circumstance and they're not so bad. That is known as the Growth of Legend. The Folk Mind in Action. You take the Carkers and the things you don't quite see and you put 'em together. And they bite."

Tallant wondered how long the beard had been absorbing beer. "And what were the Carkers?" he prompted politely.

"Ever hear of Sawney Bean? Scotland—reign of James First or maybe the Sixth, though I think Roughead's wrong on that for once. Or let's be more modern—ever hear of the Benders? Kansas in 1870s? No? Ever hear of Procrustes? Or Polyphemus? Or Fee-fi-fo-fum?"

"There are ogres, you know. They're not legend. They're fact, they are. The inn where nine guests left for every ten that arrived, the mountain cabin that sheltered travellers from the snow, sheltered them all winter till the melting spring uncovered their bones, the lonely stretches of road that so many passengers travelled halfway—you find 'em everywhere. All over Europe and pretty much in this country too before communications became what they are. Profitable business. And it wasn't just the profit. The Benders made money, sure; but that wasn't why they killed all their victims as carefully as a kosher butcher. Sawney Bean got so he didn't give a damn about the profit; he just needed to lay in more meat for the winter.

"And think of the chances you'd have at an oasis."

"So these Carkers of yours were, as you call them, ogres?"

"Carkers, ogres—maybe they were Benders. The Benders were never seen alive, you know, after the townspeople found those curiously butchered bodies. There's a rumour they got this far west. And the time checks pretty well. There wasn't any town here in the eighties. Just a couple of Indian families, last of a dying tribe living on at the oasis. They vanished after the Carkers moved in. That's not so surprising. The white race is a sort of super-ogre, anyway. Nobody worried about them. But they used to worry about why so many travellers never got across this stretch of desert. The travellers used to stop over at the Carkers, you see, and somehow they often never got any



## THEY BITE

further. Their wagons'd be found maybe fifteen miles beyond in the desert. Sometimes they found the bones, too, parched and white. Gnawed-looking, they said sometimes."

"And nobody ever did anything about these Carkers?"

"Oh, sure. We didn't have King James Sixth—only I still think it was First—to ride up on a great white horse for a gesture, but twice Army detachments came here and wiped them all out."

"Twice? One wiping-out would do for most families," Tallant smiled.

"Uh-huh. That was no slip. They wiped out the Carkers twice because you see once didn't do any good. They wiped 'em out and still travellers vanished and still there were gnawed bones. So they wiped 'em out again. After that they gave up, and people detoured the oasis. It made a longer, harder trip, but after all——"

Tallant laughed. "You mean these Carkers were immortal?"

"I don't know about immortal. They somehow just didn't die very easy. Maybe, if they were the Benders—and I sort of like to think they were—they learned a little more about what they were doing out here on the desert. Maybe they put together what the Indians knew and what they knew, and it worked. Maybe whatever they made their sacrifices to, understood them better out here than in Kansas."

"And what's become of them—aside from seeing them out of the corner of the eye?"

"There's forty years between the last of the Carker history and this new settlement at the oasis. And people won't talk much about what they learned here in the first year or so. Only that they stay away from that old Carker adobe. They tell some stories—The priest says he was sitting in the confessional one hot Saturday afternoon and thought he heard a penitent come in. He waited a long time and finally lifted the gauze to see was anybody there. Something was there, and it bit. He's got three fingers on his right hand now, which looks funny as hell when he gives a benediction."

## ANTHONY BOUCHER

Tallant pushed their two bottles toward the bartender. "That yarn, my young friend, has earned another beer. How about it it, bartender? Is he always cheerful like this, or is this just something he's improvised for my benefit?"

The bartender set out the fresh bottles with great solemnity. "Me, I wouldn't've told you all that myself, but then he's a stranger, too, and maybe don't feel the same way we do here. For him it's just a story."

"It's more comfortable that way," said the young man with the beard, and took a firm hold on his beer bottle.

"But as long as you've heard that much," said the bartender, "you might as well—It was last winter, and we had that cold spell. You heard funny stories that winter. Wolves coming into prospectors' cabins just to warm up. Well, business wasn't so good. We don't have a licence for hard liquor and the boys don't drink much beer when it's that cold. But they used to come in anyway because we've got that big oil burner.

"So one night there's bunch of 'em in here—old Jake was here, that you was talking to, and his dog Jigger—and I think I hear somebody else come in. The door creaks a little. But I don't see anybody and the poker game's going and we're talking just like we're talking now, and all of a sudden I hear a kind of noise like *crack!* over there in that corner behind the jukebox near the burner.

"I go over to see what goes and it gets away before I can see it very good. But it was little and thin and it didn't have no clothes on. It must've been damned cold that winter."

"And what was the cracking noise?" Tallant asked dutifully.

"That? That was a bone. It must've strangled Jigger without any noise. He was a little dog. It ate most of the flesh, and if it hadn't cracked the bone for the marrow it could've finished. You can still see the spots over there. The blood never did come out."

There had been silence all through the story. Now suddenly all hell broke loose. The flight sergeant let out a splendid yell and began pointing excitedly at the pinball machine and yelling for his pay-off. The construction worker dramatically deserted



## THEY BITE

the poker game, knocking his chair over in the process, and announced lugubriously that these guys here had their own rules, see?

Any atmosphere of Carker-inspired horror was dissipated. Tallant whistled as he walked over to put a nickel in the juke-box. He glanced casually at the floor. Yes, there was a stain, for what that was worth.

He smiled cheerfully and felt rather grateful to the Carkers. They were going to solve his blackmail problem very neatly.

Tallant dreamed of power that night. It was a common dream with him. He was ruler of the new American Corporate State that should follow the war; and he said to this man "Come!" and he came, and to that man "Go!" and he went, and to his servants "Do this!" and they did it.

Then the young man with the beard was standing before him, and the dirty trench coat was like the robes of an ancient prophet. And the young man said, "You see yourself riding high, don't you? Riding the crest of the wave—the Wave of the Future, you call it. But there's a deep, dark undertow that you don't see, and that's a part of the Past. And the Present and even the Future. There is evil in mankind that is blacker even than your evil, and infinitely more ancient."

And there was something in the shadows behind the young man, something little and lean and brown.

Tallant's dream did not disturb him the following morning. Nor did the thought of the approaching interview with Morgan. He fried his bacon and eggs and devoured them cheerfully. The wind had died down for a change, and the sun was warm enough so that he could strip to the waist while he cleared land for his shack. His machete glinted brilliantly as it swung through the air and struck at the roots of the brush.

Morgan's full face was red and sweating when he arrived.

"It's cool over there in the shade of the adobe," Tallant suggested. "We'll be more comfortable." And in the comfortable shade of the adobe he swung the machete once and clove Morgan's full red sweating face in two.

## ANTHONY BOUCHER

It was so simple. It took less effort than uprooting a clump of sage. And it was so safe. Morgan lived in a cabin way to hell-and-gone and was often away on prospecting trips. No one would notice his absence for months, if then. No one had any reason to connect him with Tallant. And no one in Oasis would hunt for him in the Carker-haunted adobe.

The body was heavy, and the blood dripped warm on Tallant's bare skin. With relief he dumped what had been Morgan on the floor of the adobe. There were no boards, no flooring. Just earth. Hard, but not too hard to dig a grave in. And no one was likely to come poking around in this taboo territory to notice the grave. Let a year or so go by, and the grave and the bones it contained would be attributed to the Carkers.

The corner of Tallant's eye bothered him again. Deliberately he looked about the interior of the adobe.

The little furniture was crude and heavy, with no attempt to smooth down the strokes of the axe. It was held together with wooden pegs or half-rotted thongs. There were age-old cinders in the fireplace, and the dusty shards of a cooking jar among them.

And there was a deeply hollowed stone, covered with stains that might have been rust, if stone rusted. Behind it was a tiny figure, clumsily fashioned of clay and sticks. It was something like a man and something like a lizard, and something like the things that flit across the corner of the eye.

Curious now, Tallant peered about further. He penetrated to the corner that the one unglassed window lighted but dimly. And there he let out a little choking gasp. For a moment he was rigid with horror. Then he smiled and all but laughed aloud.

This explained everything. Some curious individual had seen this, and from his account burgeoned the whole legend. The Carkers had indeed learned something from the Indians, but that secret was the art of embalming.

It was a perfect mummy. Either the Indian art had shrunk bodies, or this was that of a ten-year-old boy. There was no flesh. Only skin and bone and taut dry stretches of tendon



## THEY BITE

between. The eyelids were closed; the sockets looked hollow under them. The nose was sunken and almost lost. The scant lips were tightly curled back from the long and very white teeth, which stood forth all the more brilliantly against the deep-brown skin.

It was a curious little trove, this mummy. Tallant was already calculating the chances for raising a decent sum of money from an interested anthropologist—murder can produce such delightfully profitable chance by-products—when he noticed the infinitesimal rise and fall of the chest.

The Carker was not dead. It was sleeping.

Tallant did not dare stop to think beyond the instant. This was not time to pause to consider if such things were possible in a well-ordered world. It was no time to reflect on the disposal of the body of Morgan. It was a time to snatch up your machete and get out of there.

But in the doorway he halted. There coming across the desert, heading for the adobe, clearly seen this time, was another—a female.

He made an involuntary gesture of indecision. The blade of the machete clanged ringingly against the adobe wall. He heard the dry shuffling of a roused sleeper behind him.

He turned fully now, the machete raised. Dispose of this nearer one first, then face the female. There was no room even for terror in his thoughts, only for action.

The lean brown shape darted at him avidly. He moved lightly away and stood poised for its second charge. It shot forward again. He took one step back, machete-arm raised, and fell headlong over the corpse of Morgan. Before he could rise the thin thing was upon him. Its sharp teeth had met through the palm of his left hand.

The machete moved swiftly. The thin, dry body fell headless to the floor. There was no blood.

The grip of the teeth did not relax. Pain coursed up Tallant's left arm—a sharper, more bitter pain than you would expect from the bite. Almost as though venom——

## ANTHONY BOUCHER

He dropped the machete, and his strong white hand plucked and twisted at the dry brown lips. The teeth stayed clenched, unrelaxing. He sat bracing his back against the wall and gripped the head between his knees. He pulled. His flesh ripped, and blood formed dusty clots on the dirt floor. But the bite was firm.

His world had become reduced now to that hand and that head. Nothing outside mattered. He must free himself. He raised his aching arm to his face, and with his own teeth he tore at that unrelenting grip. The dry flesh crumbled away in the desert dust, but the teeth were locked fast. He tore his lip against their white keenness, and tasted in his mouth the sweetness of blood and something else.

He staggered to his feet again. He knew what he must do. Later he could use cautery, a tourniquet, see a doctor with a story about a Gila monster—their heads grip, too, don't they?—but he knew what he must do now.

He raised the machete and struck again.

His white hand lay on the brown floor, gripped by the white teeth in the brown face. He propped himself against the adobe wall, momentarily unable to move. His open wrist hung over the deeply hollowed stone. His blood and his strength and his life poured out before the little figure of sticks and clay.

The female stood in the doorway now, the sun bright on her thin brownness. She did not move. He knew that she was waiting for the hollow stone to fill.



# The Two Vaynes

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L. P. HARTLEY

Those garden-statues! My host was pardonably proud of them. They crowned the balustrade of the terrace; they flanked its steps; they dominated the squares and oblongs—high, roofless chambers of clipped yew—which, seen from above, had somewhat the appearance of a chessboard. In fact, they peopled the whole vast garden; and as we went from one to another in the twilight of a late September evening, I gave up counting them. Some stood on low plinths on the closely-shaven grass; others, water-deities, rose out of goldfish-haunted pools. Each was supreme in its own domain and enveloped in mystery, secrecy and silence.

“What do you call these?” I asked my host, indicating the enclosures. “They have such an extraordinary shut-in feeling.”

“Temene,” he said, carefully stressing the three syllables. “Temenos is Greek for the precincts of a god.”

“The Greeks had a word for it,” I said, but he was not amused.

Some of the statues were of grey stone, on which lichen grew in golden patches; others were of lead, the sooty hue of which seemed sun-proof. These were already gathering to themselves the coming darkness: perhaps they had never really let it go.

It was the leaden figures that my host most resembled; in his sober country clothes of almost clerical cut—breeches, tight at the knee, surmounting thin legs cased in black stockings, with something recalling a Norfolk jacket on top—he looked so like one of his own duskier exhibits that, as the sinking sun plunged

L. P. HARTLEY

the temene in shadow, and he stood with outstretched arm pointing at a statue that was also pointing, he might have been mistaken for one.

"I have another to show you," he said, "and then I'll let you go and dress."

Rather to my surprise, he took my arm and steered me to the opening, which, I now saw, was in the further corner. (Each temenos had an inlet and an outlet, to connect it with its neighbours.) As we passed through, he let go of my arm and bent down as though to tie up his shoe-lace. I walked slowly on towards a figure which, even at this distance, seemed in some way to differ from the others.

They were all gods and goddesses, nymphs and satyrs, dryads and oreads, divinities of the ancient world: but this was not. I quickened my steps. It was the figure of a man in modern dress, and something about it was familiar. But was it a statue? Involuntarily, I stood still and looked back. My host was not following me; he had disappeared. Yet here he was, facing me, with his arm stretched out, almost as if he were going to shake hands with me. But no; the bent forefinger showed that he was beckoning.

Again I looked behind me to the opening now shrouded in shadow, but there was no one. Stifling my repugnance and, to be frank, my fear, and putting into my step all the defiance I could muster, I approached the figure. It was smiling with the faint sweet smile of invitation that one sees in some of Leonardo's pictures. So life-like was the smile, such a close copy of the one I had seen on my host's face, that I stopped again, wondering which to believe: my common sense or my senses. While I was debating, a laugh rang out. I jumped—the figure might have uttered it; it sounded so near. But the smiling features never changed, and a second later I saw my host coming to me across the grass.

He laughed again, less histrionically, and rather uncertainly I joined in.

"Well," he said, "you must forgive my practical joke. But



## THE TWO VAYNES

you'll understand how it amuses me to see what my guests will *do* when they see that figure. I've had a hole made through the hedge to watch. Some of them have been quite frightened. Some see through the trick at once and laugh before I get the chance to—the joke is then on me. But most of them do what you did—start and stop, and start and stop, wondering if they can trust their eyes. It's fun watching people when they don't know they are being watched. I can always tell which are the . . . the imaginative ones."

I laughed a little wryly.

"Cheer up," he said, though I would have rather he had not noticed my loss of poise. "You came through the ordeal very well. Not an absolute materialist like the brazen ones, who know no difference between seeing and believing. And not—certainly not—well, a funk, like some of them. Mind you, I don't despise them for it. You stood your ground. A well-balanced man, I should say, hard-headed but open-minded, cautious but resolute. You said you were a writer?"

"In my spare time," I mumbled.

"Then you are used to looking behind appearances."

While he was speaking, I compared him to the figure, and though the general resemblance was striking—the same bold nose, the same retreating forehead—I wondered how I could have been taken in by it. The statue's texture was so different! Lead, I supposed. Having lost my superstitious horror, I came nearer. I detected a thin crack in the black stocking, and thoughtlessly put my finger-nail into it.

"Don't do that," he warned me. "The plaster flakes off so easily."

I apologised. "I didn't mean to pull your leg. But is it plaster? It's so dark, as dark as, well—your suit."

"It was painted that colour," my host said, "to make the likeness closer."

I looked again. The statue's face and hands were paler than its clothes, but only a pale shade of the same tone. And this, I saw, was true to life. A leaden tint underlay my host's natural swarthy-ness.

L. P. HARTLEY

"But the other statues are of stone, aren't they?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "they are. This one was an experiment."

"An experiment?"

"My experiment," he said. "I made it." He did not try to conceal his satisfaction.

"How clever of you!" I exclaimed, stepping back to examine the cast more critically. "It's you to the life. It almost seems to move."

"Move?" he repeated, his voice distant and discouraging.

"Yes, move," I said, excited by my fantasy. "Don't you see how flat the grass is round it? Wouldn't a statue let the grass grow under its feet?"

He answered still more coldly: "My gardeners have orders to clip the grass with shears."

Snubbed and anxious to retrieve myself, I said, "Oh, but it's the living image!" I remembered the motto on his crested writing-paper. "*Vayne sed non vanus*. I adore puns. 'Vayne but not vain.' You but not you. How do you translate it?"

"We usually say, 'Vayne but not empty'." My host's voice sounded mollified.

"How apt!" I prattled on. "It's Vayne all right, but is it empty? Is it just a suit of clothes?"

He looked hard at me and said:

"Doesn't the apparel oft proclaim the man?"

"Of course," I said, delighted by the quickness of his answer. "But isn't this Vayne a bigger man than you are—in the physical sense, I mean?"

"I like things to be over-lifesize," he replied. "I have a passion for the grand scale."

"And here you are able to indulge it," I said, glancing towards the great house which made a rectangle of intense dark in the night sky.

"But service isn't what it was before the war," he rather platitudinously remarked. "The trouble I've had, looking for a footman! Still, I think you'll find your bath has been turned on for you."



## THE TWO VAYNES

I took the hint and was moving away when suddenly he called me back.

"Look," he said, "don't let's change for dinner. I've got an idea. Fairclough hasn't been before; it's his first visit, too. He hasn't seen the statues. After dinner we'll play a game of hide and seek. I'll hide, and you and he shall seek—here, among the statues. It may be a bit dull for you, because you'll be in the secret. But if you're bored, you can hunt for me, too—I don't think you'll find me. That's the advantage of knowing the terrain—perhaps rather an unfair one. We'll have a time-limit. If you haven't found me within twenty minutes, I'll make a bolt for home, whatever the circumstances."

"Where will 'home' be?"

"I'll tell you later. But don't say anything to Fairclough."

I promised not to. "But, forgive me," I said, "I don't quite see the point——"

"Don't you? What I want to happen is for Fairclough to mistake the statue for me. I want to see him . . . well . . . startled by it."

"He might tackle it low and bring it crashing down."

My host looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"If you think that, you don't know him. He's much too timid. He won't touch it—they never do until they know what it is."

By "they" I supposed him to mean his dupes, past, present and to come.

We talked a little more and parted.

I found the footman laying out my dress-suit on the bed. I told him about not changing and asked if Mr. Fairclough had arrived yet.

"Yes, sir, he's in his room."

"Could you take me to it?"

I followed along a passage inadequately lit by antique hanging lanterns most of which were solid at the bottom.

Fairclough was changing. I told him we were to wear our ordinary clothes.

"What!" he exclaimed. "But he always changes for dinner."

L. P. HARTLEY

"Not this evening." I didn't altogether like my role of accomplice, but Fairclough had the weakness of being a know-all. Perhaps it would do him no harm to be surprised for once.

"I wonder if Postgate changed," I said, broaching the topic which had been exercising my mind ever since I set foot in the house.

"He must have done," said Fairclough. "Didn't you know? His dress-clothes were never found."

"I don't remember the story at all well," I prompted him.

"There's very little to remember," Fairclough said. "He arrived, as we have; they separated to change for dinner, as we have; and he was never seen or heard of again."

"There were other guests, weren't there?"

"Yes, the house was full of people."

"When exactly did it happen?"

"Three years ago, two years after Vayne resigned the chairmanship."

"Postgate had a hand in that, hadn't he?"

"Yes, don't you know?" said Fairclough. "It was rather generous of Vayne to forgive him in the circumstances. It didn't make much difference to Vayne; he'd probably have resigned in any case, when he inherited this place from his uncle. It was meant to be a sort of reconciliation party, burying the hatchet, and all that."

I agreed that it was magnanimous of Vayne to make it up with someone who had got him sacked. "And he's still loyal to the old firm," I added, "or we shouldn't be here."

"Yes, and we're such small fry," Fairclough said. "It's the company, not us, he's being kind to."

I thought of the small ordeal ahead of Fairclough, but it hardly amounted to a breach of kindness.

"I suppose we mustn't mention Postgate to him?" I said.

"Why not? I believe he likes to talk about him. Much better for him than bottling it up."

"Would you call him a vain man?" I asked.

"Certainly, Vayne by name and vain by nature."



## THE TWO VAYNES

"He seemed rather pleased with himself as a sculptor," I remarked.

"A sculptor?" echoed Fairclough.

I realized my indiscretion, but had gone too far to draw back. "Yes, didn't you know?" I asked maliciously. "He's done a statue. A sort of portrait. And he talks of doing some more. Portraits of his friends in plaster. He asked me if I'd be his model."

"I wonder if he'd do one of me?" asked Fairclough, with instinctive egotism. "I should make rather a good statue, I think." Half-undressed he surveyed himself in the mirror. Long and willowy, fair complexioned as his name, he had a bulging knobby forehead under a thin thatch of hair. "Did you say yes?" he asked.

"I said I couldn't stand, but if he would make it a recumbent effigy, I would lie to him."

We both laughed.

"Where's his studio?" asked Fairclough, almost humbly.

"Underground. He says he prefers to work by artificial light."

We both thought about this, and some association of ideas made me ask:

"Is the house haunted?"

"Not that I ever heard of," Fairclough said. "But there's a legend about a bath."

"A bath?"

"Yes, it's said to be on the site of an old lift-shaft, and to go up and down. Funny how such stories get about. And talking of baths," Fairclough went on, "I must be getting into mine. You may not know it, but he doesn't like one to be a minute late."

"Just let me look at it," I said. "Mine's down a passage. You have one of your own, you lucky dog."

We inspected the appointments, which were marble and luxurious, and very up to date, except for the bath itself, which was an immense, old-fashioned mahogany contraption with a lid.

"A lid!" I exclaimed. "Don't you know the story of the

Mistletoe Bough?" Fairclough clearly didn't, and with this parting shot I left him.

In spite of Fairclough's warning, I was a few minutes late for dinner. How that came about occupied my thoughts throughout the marvellous meal, though I could not bring myself to speak of it and would much rather not have thought about it. I'm afraid I was a dull guest, and Vayne himself was less animated than he had been before dinner. After dinner, however, he cheered up, and when he was giving us our orders for the evening, editing them somewhat for Fairclough's benefit, he had recovered all his old assurance. We were to divide, he said; I was to take the left-hand range of yew compartments, or temene, as he liked to call them, Fairclough the right. From the top of the terrace steps, a long steep flight, he indicated to us our spheres of action. "And home will be here, where I'm standing," he wound up. "I'll call 'coo-ee' when I'm ready."

He strolled off in the direction of the house. Fairclough and I walked cautiously down the steps on to the great circle of grass from which the two blocks of temene diverged. Here we bowed ceremoniously and parted. Fairclough disappeared into the black wall of yew.

At last I was alone with my thoughts. Of course it was only another of Vayne's practical jokes; I realized that now. But at the moment when it happened I was scared stiff. And I still couldn't help wondering what would have become of me if—well, if I had got into the bath. I just put my foot in, as I often do, to test the water. I didn't pull it out at once, for the water was rather cool. In fact I put my whole weight on it.

"Coo-ee!"

Now the hunt was up. Fairclough would be peering in the shadows. But mine was merely a spectator's role; I was Vayne's stooge. His stooge. . . .

Directly I felt something give, I pulled my foot out, and the lid came down and the bath sank through the floor like a coffin at a cremation service. Goodness, how frightened I was! I heard



## THE TWO VAYNES

the click as the bath touched bottom; but I couldn't see it down the shaft. Then I heard rumbling again, and saw the bath-lid coming up. But I did not risk getting in, not I.

"Coo-ee!"

I jumped. It sounded close beside me. I moved into another temenos, trying to pretend that I was looking for Vayne. Really it would serve him right if I gave him away to Fairclough. He had no business to frighten people like that.

"Coo-ee!"

Right over on Fairclough's side, now. But it sounded somehow different; was it an owl? It might not be very easy to find Fairclough; there must be half a hundred blasted temene, and the moon was hidden by clouds. He might go out through one opening just as I was entering by another, and so we might go on all night. Thank goodness the night was warm. But what a silly farce it was.

I could just see to read my watch. Another quarter of an hour to go. Fairclough must be getting jumpy. I'll go and find him, I thought, and put him wise about the figure. Vayne would never know. Or would he? One couldn't tell where he was, he might be in the next temenos, watching me through a hole.

A light mist was descending, which obscured the heads of such statues as I could see projecting above the high walls of the temene. If it grew thicker, I might not see Fairclough even if he were close to me, and we might wander about till Doomsday—at least, for another ten minutes, which seemed just as long to wait.

I looked down, and saw that my feet had left tracks, dark patches in the wet grass. They seemed to lead in all directions. But were they all mine? Had I really walked about as much as that? I tried to identify the footprints and see if they tallied.

"Coo-ee!"

That almost certainly was an owl; the sound seemed to come from above. But perhaps Vayne added ventriloquism to his other accomplishments. He was capable of anything. Not a man

one could trust. Postgate hadn't trusted him—not, at least, as the chairman of the company.

It was my duty, I now felt, to warn Fairclough. And I should be quite glad to see him myself, quite glad. But where was he?

I found myself running from one temenos to another and getting back to the one I started from. I could tell by the figure: at least that didn't move. I started off again. Steady, steady. Here was a temenos with no footprints on it—a virgin temenos. I crossed it and found myself in the central circle. I crossed that too.

Now I was in Fairclough's preserves. Poor Fairclough! To judge by the footprints, he had been running round even more than I had. But were they all his? Here was the figure of Pan—the god of panic. Very appropriate.

"Fairclough! Fairclough!" I began to call as loudly as I dared, having nearly but not quite lost my head.

"Fairclough! Fairclough!" I couldn't bring myself to hug the walls; the shadows were too thick; I stuck to the middle of each space.

I suppose I was expecting to find him, and yet when I heard him answer "Here!" I nearly jumped out of my skin. He was crouching against a hedge. He evidently had the opposite idea from mine; he felt the hedge was a protection; and I had some difficulty in persuading him to come out into the open.

"Listen!" I whispered. "What you've got to do is——"

"But I've seen him," Fairclough said. "There's his footmark."

I looked: the footmark was long and slurred, quite unlike his or mine.

"If you were sure it was him," I said, "why didn't you speak to him?"

"I did," said Fairclough, "but he didn't answer. He didn't even turn round."

"Someone may have got into the garden," I said, "some third person. But we'll find out. I'll take you to the statue."

"The statue?"

"I'll explain afterwards."



## THE TWO VAYNES

I had regained my confidence, but could not remember in which direction Vayne's statue lay.

Suddenly I had an idea.

"We'll follow the footprints."

"Which?" asked Fairclough.

"Well, the other person's."

Easy to say; easy to distinguish them from ours; but which way were they pointing? That was the question.

"He walks on his heels," I said. "It's this way."

We followed and reached the temenos where the statue had stood. No possibility of mistake. We saw the patches of dead grass where its feet had been; we saw the footprints leading away from them. But the statue was not there.

"Vayne!" I shouted. "Vayne!"

"Coo-ee!" came the distant call.

"To the steps," I cried. "To the steps! Let's go together!"

Vayne was standing on the terrace steps: I saw him plainly; and I also saw the figure that was stalking him: the other Vayne. Two Vaynes. Vayne our host, the shorter of the two, stood lordly, confident, triumphing over the night. "Coo-ee!" he hooted to his moonlit acres. "Coo-ee!" But the other Vayne had crept up the grass slope and was crouching at his back.

For a moment the two figures stood one behind the other, motionless as cats. Then a scream rang out; there was a whirl of limbs, like the Manxman's wheel revolving; a savage snarl, a headlong fall, a crash. Both fell, both Vaynes. When the thuds of their descent were over, silence reigned.

They were lying in a heap together, a tangled heap of men and plaster. A ceiling might have fallen on them, yet it was not a ceiling; it was almost a third man, for the plaster fragments still bore a human shape. Both Vaynes were dead but one of them, we learned afterwards, had been dead for a long time. And this Vayne was not Vayne at all, but Postgate.

# Tell Me, Doctor—Please

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KIT READ

Deegan knew exactly why he was here—he was sick. But it didn't help.

For him the building would always have an eerie, greenish cast, and despite the covey of nurses, the flock of aides, the legion of little men with long-handled brooms who shuffled past, swishing, sweeping the corridor outside his room, he would always have the feeling that at its heart the building was deserted. So far, this was all he could remember of himself inside the building. There was nothing more but a web of aching, burning weakness. So far.

They had to make him better. With just a little strength he could make his way back to the terminal, to his own century without being followed. He tried to move and a wave of weakness took him. On the crest of it, remembering himself as he had been, he was surprised to hear himself crying.

Outside his room a steam table rumbled past, the first outside sound to penetrate his miasma of pain. Using it as a lever—a beginning to awakening—he forced open his eyes.

They offered him a kaleidoscope of sparks and swimming rainbows. Blinking, he tried again, and this time picked out a shape. He pushed his eyes, straining against the circle of pain, and the shape came clear. He fixed on it—a bottle, shimmering on a stand above him, and on the tube that led down from the bottle—looped here, to slow the flow of fluid—and from this vantage point he fought back the blur until he could make out a second rack, a second tube, a whole network of tubes and drains, and



## TELL ME, DOCTOR—PLEASE

when his field of vision had expanded he assured himself of the shapes of a rolling table, a white screen, the drab squareness of a white, aseptic room, and then brought his mind back to the tubes—and found that they fed needles fixed, one in the back of either hand, and that the whole complex structure of rubber and wires had one focus, one purpose—to serve his body.

He moaned as well as he could through the apparatus, hoping someone would hear it and come. Minutes went by, unmeasured. A part of him remembered that each hour was parcelled into segments, and each segment identified by some matter of routine, and that there was no one at his door to answer his call, to come into his room, because it wasn't time.

He moaned again—for the last time, because moaning seemed unnatural to him. Waiting, he contemplated his hands and wrists as best he could, noticed that a needle had slipped from his vein and that the whole flat, bony structure of his hand was puffy now, slowly filling up with fluid.

“You're a long way from home.” The nurse had come into the room in the wake of a sweeper, who busied himself under the washbasin fixed to the closet door.

Deegan looked at her warily.

“Now, look at this.” She clucked over the hand and pulled the needle out. Quivering with gratitude, Deegan tried to tighten his fingers, but she had already turned the hand over and back, found a vein that suited her and plunged the needle in again.

She took his pulse. “. . . You should have seen yourself when they brought you in. Collapsing, right in the Obelisk—at a conference. . .” She clucked again.

*Was I very bad?* He was trying to ask and she knew it—but there were too many tubes, too many drains.

He remembered being almost black, bloated with poison, but he couldn't ask her about it now, now that she seemed loose-tongued, more than willing to answer. He remembered her from before the anæsthetic. She had walked beside the chromium cart, impassive, the perfect nurse—even when his voice spiralled, crowded with questions. It was then, in the face of her silence,

## KIT READ

that he had conceived the idea that the hospital was really deserted, and he had thought wildly of robot captors, like the mechanical enclave at Ansk. But that was in another time. He had fallen back, more frightened by his weakness than hurt by it—helpless in a strange century.

He noted with fright that the nurse's fingernails were done in green.

"Must have been quite a conference——" She slid the thermometer between his lips as if it had been greased, and when it had been there too long she added, "you and all the big guys", as if waiting for him to tell her something, and when a flicker behind his eyes refused her she let it stay until his mouth filled with saliva and then, disdainful, pulled it out. Carelessly, she juggled two white pills in her hand.

"I wonder what you talked about."

They'd have to be more subtle than that, he thought with rising anger, and saw her jounce the pills indifferently as he refused to respond, and slip them back into the white, transparent pocket in her shirt.

Under the basin, the sweeper stood up suddenly, and his head thumped against porcelain. The nurse turned on him with cold eyes and watched until he slouched, freezing, from the room. Then, with no more time for Deegan, she went out.

An hour later there was the juice cart, and in the next hour the thermometer and the sphygmomanometer, and later someone changed the bottles swinging above him, bringing fresh ones, and later someone brought another bottle, which was food. Deegan steeled himself, waiting for the questions, and when no one came to barter pills for answers he nerved himself for the next phase. They would take away the paraphernalia of healing, he was sure—they would put him somewhere for questioning in earnest—for torture, perhaps. He had been conditioned to withstand torture. Their government would want to know where he came from, why he was prepared to offer vast sums in return for deposits of certain minerals, to be cached in predetermined caverns in the earth. If they suspected he came from their



## TELL ME, DOCTOR—PLEASE

future, and from which future he came, there would be no peace for him. And they wouldn't let him be until he had betrayed the location of the gate to his century, and they would hound him until he led them there. Torture. . . . He managed a pale, scornful smile.

Restless, already aching from unremitting contact with bed, he found himself almost wishing they would get on with it. But they had chosen other methods.

Days passed and no one came but the cardboard figures of his routine, with an occasional blunt question, an offer (relief in exchange for information) so overt that he had no choice but to refuse them, wondering why they thought an attempt so blatant would work with him. As days passed with no change he fretted weakly, and wondered petulantly when they would make him well. They were so efficient about the care of his body that he couldn't keep himself from hoping that the next day he would be better. He dwelled on the injections, the sphygmomanometer, each change in his bodily temperature, and when each day brought no change for the better he expected something different of the next—he expected to wake and find that one of the tubes, at least, was gone.

"Must have been quite a conference," the nurse said for the twentieth time, and without waiting for him to try to turn his face to the wall, she put the white pills in her pocket. "You're quite a man of steel, aren't you?" she said, sighing in exasperation.

And from that day on there weren't even questions. There was just the routine.

Deegan could feel himself growing paler, diminishing. He was frightened most, as he had been from the beginning, by the weakness, because his body was his pride. Now he could not have lifted his hand to free it from the needle even if he had wanted to, and he seemed to be at one with the bed, taking on its colour, sinking into it, and in the early hours of one morning he found himself sobbing despite the tubes taped beneath his nostrils. The weak tears came quickly and more often after that. He

twisted, trying to hint by some contortion of the face that he might be receptive to a question, wishing there would be just one question put in such a way that he could answer it and take the pill or the injection offered in exchange for it, damaging his pride. But now there weren't even questions.

He woke on some nameless morning to blinding sunlight and the clatter of a shade. He couldn't stop the tears, even though the grizzled sweeper, who had clattered beneath his basin faithfully each morning, thrust his face into the mist above Deegan's bed.

"I know somebody kin help you," he said. Then, because Deegan closed his eyes wearily because it was expected of him, he added, "No questions."

A part of Deegan was already moving ahead, sorting pieces of useless information he could afford to offer in exchange for a return to strength, craftily planning the economy of his recovery. He managed to nod.

Suddenly the doctor was in the room. "They should have called me in earlier," he said, and deftly he untaped the needles and removed them from the backs of Deegan's hands.

He wept, and through his tears sorted out the doctor's image. He was large, round-bottomed and rosy, with a head as pear-shaped as his body, so that it dwindled from an incredible, shaven, jutting jaw to a knot of curls a few inches above his glasses. As Deegan watched, he took off the glasses, all health and confidence.

"I just wear them for Appearances," he said, and wiped them on his pants. Then, wanting Deegan to understand, he added, "You know—first impressions. . . ."

Deegan's mouth trembled in an unaccustomed smile. When the doctor had run an expert depressor over his tongue and left, he found himself weeping again, wondering at the freedom of his wrists, turning them feebly on the covers.

That was all that day.

The next day the doctor came again, in a rush of vitality that



made Deegan want to cry out his soul to him, and took away the last of the tubes and drains.

"I began wearing them when I was an intern," the doctor said, colossal in the window. "Made me look older—you know." Deegan realized he was talking about the glasses. He turned reassuringly. "When we get you built up a little, we'll talk about getting you well. Don't worry," he said. "Gain strength." And Deegan was alone.

By the third day, when he had prescribed a white powder that enabled Deegan to keep himself from weeping, Deegan thought of him as a god. He rested well that night, freed of the apparatus that had crowded his bed since the first day. He even managed to prop his head up on the pillow when he woke, and prepared a bright face for the doctor.

"I have just a slight correction," the doctor said, at the window. He was talking about the glasses again. "I could do without them if I thought it would be better." He turned suddenly. "—Do you think I'd look better without them? On the job, I mean."

"I . . ." Deegan stopped, thrilled by the sound of his own voice. "They—look—fine," he added.

"You really think so?" The doctor made a little rush toward him, beaming. Then, with alacrity, he parted the front of Deegan's hospital robe and applied the knob of his stethoscope to Deegan's chest. "... Pressure on the diaphragm," he muttered professionally, "... fluid. We have an injection which should clear this up." Then, almost genially, he went on, "Of course you will have to answer certain questions. About your—history." He raised his eyebrow knowingly and his forehead ridged in wrinkles that met his hair. "I'm sure the injection will do the trick. You're willing?"

Grateful to him for being so subtle, for making it sound as if there had been no promise made, Deegan whispered, "Of course."

And the next morning, muttering as if to himself, Deegan told him why the mineral deposits were vital to his people. They could be changed into something valuable.

After the injection, he was unconscious for a day. When he woke, he was sure he was getting well. The doctor was inspecting the array of plants that seemed to have taken over the window-sill.

"I think glasses give a man stature," Deegan volunteered.

Radiant, the doctor turned to him. "I've always felt that myself. When I go on for advance work—on to psychiatry—I think they'll stand me in good stead."

"I'm in analysis myself, you know," he said the next day. "Each psychiatrist has to go through five years of it—to prepare himself," he said. "Before we can help others our own psyches have to be—pure."

Deegan was busy raising his hands until his arms were at a perpendicular. He half listened, feeling the strength course back into him.

"Even as I must be well and strong before I can help your body," the doctor said. The reflections on his glasses seemed like tiny windows cut in his head.

"Oh, yes," Deegan said, wondering how soon he would be able to bound the way the doctor did. "Glasses—inspire confidence," he said, because the doctor seemed to be waiting.

"*Mens sana in corpore sano*," the doctor said, all capability, and strode out of the room.

The next morning Deegan tried to sit up—and fainted, head hanging at an improbable angle, mouth wetting the linens at the edge of the bed.

"Things aren't going as I had planned," the doctor said, tapping Deegan again and shaking his head.

Glowing with gratitude at his presence, Deegan listened placidly.

"There's more fluid, I'm afraid," the doctor said. Then, gently, "I'm afraid we've had a little setback."

Deegan couldn't stop the tears.

"But I have the solution this time."

He fixed on the doctor, suppliant. "I—I can't go through it again."



## TELL ME, DOCTOR—PLEASE

"It will mean a drain," the doctor said, wiping his glasses and putting them on. "Painful—but it will do the trick." He loomed, god-like. "There's something I'll want to ask you."

Deegan hesitated. "But you'll make me well. . . ."

"This will do the trick." The doctor put the glasses away. "Put your faith in me."

Deegan lumped his whole being in his eyes, proffering it, nodding assent.

He was unconscious for the next few hours while they punctured his side, and the poisonous byproduct of his illness spilled into a pan set carefully at the end of a rubber drain.

"You've done it," he said two days later, when he was strong enough to speak. "How can I thank you. . . ."

In the windows, the plants were flourishing. The doctor regarded them through freshly polished glasses. "You've already thanked me," he said.

Deegan, just before he had gone under, had revealed that the mineral deposits were valuable only when alloyed with an element which existed in his time alone. There was, at the back of his mind, the nagging memory of this betrayal. But he knew he had kept the important parts of his secret to himself. Would keep them so, inviolate. "The glasses make you look older," he said, trying to show his gratitude.

The doctor frowned slightly. "I've been wondering whether it wouldn't be better to do without them," he said. "I'd hate to think I needed them for a prop."

Deegan sensed the change in his mood. "Whatever you think."

He began to exercise his hands, wadding the sheet between his fingers and clenching them, and some days later, weak but triumphant, he sat up for the first time. The next day, they would transfer him to a wheelchair for a visit to the solarium.

The next day he was sick again, so sick he could only think back to the day before, to himself sitting up, as the strongest, happiest time of his life, of the new setback as the worst.

He saw only the glint of light on the doctor's glasses before he went under and they operated. After, he had some vestigial

memory of himself talking uncontrollably, spewing out the name of his city, Arragon, its place in time, naming its riches in a litany of pain. But even then, with his body saturated with water and pus and the knife waiting to release them, something had made him crafty and he had withheld the last piece of information. Until they learned how to find the turntable—how to get into his own time and pillage it—they would have to keep him alive.

Flaccid, grateful for this new treatment, Deegan mended. Often the doctor sat and talked of his own preoccupations, not caring that Deegan couldn't answer, until he too fell silent and they would stare together.

"You've done so much for me," Deegan said, when he could talk.

"I've only done what a doctor has to do." The doctor's voice was strong, his face flawless behind the glasses.

"But you must have a special touch." Deegan had examined the incision in his side one day at bath-time, and had been appalled by its expert beauty. "You—you can do anything."

The doctor lowered his head modestly, but even Deegan could see how much it pleased him. "Just have faith in me."

"I do," Deegan said blindly.

He had to call on that faith a few days later when the doctor, at his bedside for a checkup, let his face grow grave and said, "Enjoy your strength."

"I don't understand." Deegan was sitting on the edge of the bed, dangling his feet. They had been talking about Arragon (he still had a few facts to barter for sedatives and clean dressings) and medicine and what glasses did for a man.

"I must tell you——" The doctor seemed deeply affected. "They told me—I—I think you're going to have another reversal."

"No." Deegan lowered himself to the floor, quivering. "No, please."

"Don't worry," the doctor said. "We'll come out of it together."

"You'll take care of me," Deegan said, staring into the blank faces of the glasses. "I was thinking, I wonder if bifocals . . ."



## TELL ME, DOCTOR—PLEASE

"I shouldn't be telling you this ahead of time." The doctor pushed his face into Deegan's and Deegan saw how pink he had become. "But your temperature, the charts . . ."

Deegan clutched at his middle.

The doctor helped him to the bed. "I think you may be filling up again."

"Please—no more. You can get into my time by setting dials on a turntable," Deegan said fast, almost without thinking. "Just make me better and I'll show you where it is and how to run it. . . ."

The doctor patted his arm until he was still. "How do you know I'll even ask?" He polished his glasses furiously, naked without them, and said for the first time, "How do you know I'll be able to help you?"

"You will," Deegan said, eyes blurred so that the light behind the doctor's head seemed diffused into a halo. "You have to."

"Hush, now." The doctor touched the rib cage professionally. "There is a way—draining the cavity, refilling it with—never mind. It will absorb what is there, prohibit any further . . ."

"And this will do it?" Deegan asked.

"It should."

"This will do it," Deegan told himself. The doctor said so.

"It should be the last operation. . . ."

"And I'll be able to go home. Doctor . . ." Deegan raised his hands, worshipping.

The doctor surveyed him through flat lenses, sure, unimpeachable. "Do as much walking as you can these next few days—to the window and back. When the time comes you'll be stronger, more ready. . . ."

"Yes. Oh, yes." Deegan's eyes shone.

He came to his feet like a skeleton minutes after the doctor had left, walking from bed to chair and back again, insubstantial as a ghost, before he collapsed, exhausted. The next day he made it as far as the door, not even recognizing his image in the mirror above the white metal chest of drawers, moving precariously as

if any mis-step might disturb the balance and make him unfit for the final operation.

Each day the doctor came and talked, and one morning as he turned to go Deegan got to his feet in an excess of admiration, trembling, whirling, like the last vestiges of a leaf, loath to let the man go, and followed him. He had the idea that once the doctor saw him walking, he would be so proud, so surprised, that he would tell Deegan everything was turning for the better and he wouldn't have to have the operation after all. Bumping against the walls almost without impact, Deegan made his way down the hall, sure somehow that if he kept that starched white coat, that rosy back-of-the-neck, the almost perfect shoulders in sight, all would be well. He pushed on even when the blows of his hospital gown, flapping at his fragile legs, seemed intolerable, but by the time he had pushed himself around a corner, the doctor had vanished. Suddenly lost, not even sure from which room he had come, Deegan fluttered along the walls with the dusty wing-strokes of a moth, until he came to a stop outside a half-open door, transfixed by two voices—one babbling, suppliant, the other calm and powerful.

"I gave him the new series—just as you said—and now the cavity is filling and I don't know . . ." The suppliant burred on.

"You will give him a new injection." The voice of power outlined a formula. "It will help him—for a while."

"And then?"

"Then you'll ask him about the function of the turntable." The power, the authority, seemed to fill the room and overflow into the hall.

"And when I find out for you, you'll get on with my analysis—help me with the dreams?" The suppliant's breath fluttered.

Deegan knew the voice, but he teetered just outside the doorway, not letting himself admit he knew.

"You will do as you're told and then we'll see," the authority—the analyst—said.

"You have to help me, you have to . . ." The suppliant muffled



## TELL ME, DOCTOR—PLEASE

a sob. "The dreams—my anxieties—I feel so inadequate, and this man is getting sicker. . . ."

Shrinking, wavering, Deegan found the strength to propel himself into the doorway.

The man whose identity he had tried to keep from himself knelt at the feet of an enormous figure. Deegan's doctor knelt with one hand on a brilliantly polished black shoe, and above it rose his analyst, garbed in starched white, girded and collared in stiff linen, monolithic, unassailable. On his brow, catching the light and throwing it out to Deegan, was an immense reflector, which glinted and glittered and hid all but the shadowed outlines of his face.

"I only wear it for Appearances," the analyst said to no one, touching it.

"What about the operation?" Deegan's doctor, oblivious of the gasp which came from Deegan, the change in the atmosphere, went on.

"We'll save the operation." The analyst seemed so huge, so sure. "There are a few more facts we must have."

"He's going to guess . . ."

"That he'll never be any better?" The analyst looked up. He seemed to see Deegan, but Deegan, clinging to the door like a plant with many suckers, could not be sure. "That's why we have to press on with the questions."

"The incision—filling the cavity . . ." the doctor's shoulders were shaking. "You'll have to tell me how to *do* it."

The words knifed at Deegan's vitals. The *unsureness*. . . .

"Haven't I always told you how to do things?" The analyst sat like a white monument. "Step by step."

"You have to help me . . ." The doctor shook uncontrollably. "With the operation—my anxieties. . . ." He was pulling at his curly hair now, undone.

"Haven't I always helped you?" The analyst's voice was steely. "When you did certain things for me?"

"Yes—you've helped me—my father problem—inadequacy—my *glasses*. . . ." And the doctor, Deegan's idol and his only hope, dissolved in tears.

## KIT READ

"When you come to me with full knowledge of the turntable, I'll give you something for your anxieties." The analyst looked up now, met Deegan's eyes for a cold instant and continued, with supreme indifference. "You may even be able to help him. And you may get well."

He got to his feet with a massive, starchy crackle, skirted the doctor, adjusting the reflector on his brow, and went past Deegan into the hall.

Deegan looked to his doctor, who was sobbing abandonedly now, beating the glasses on the checkered tile floor. A strange, wiry strength came into his body as the fury took him, and for one moment he was poised, ready to lunge at his betrayer, his doctor, to smash the glasses and lock his fingers in that curly hair. . . .

Then he turned to look after the analyst and his fury melted into hope and he braced himself, pulling himself into the semblance of a man walking, and Deegan followed the glint of the mirror reflector, ready to lead the analyst in a charge to his own century if only this doctors' doctor would make him well. He threw himself at the analyst's heels like a dying man who throws himself on a spring, bathing in the gleam of light reflected from the great man's brow. If anyone could help him . . . With a quick, distracted motion, the analyst kicked him loose and went through a door.

And Deegan, no more than a puddle of hope, heard a change in the analyst's tone as a new voice joined it in colloquy within. He drew this into himself and assimilated it and adjusted, beyond disappointment now. It was the author of the new voice who mattered, then. In a final, spastic frenzy, he lunged into the room, voice beginning before he could stop it, rising to a wail.

Before him, the figure at the desk looked at Deegan over the suppliant form of the analyst, and this new personage wet his lips, eyes filmed with hope and relief.

"Oh, Doctor," he said. "Thank heaven you've come."



# Acknowledgments

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